

# VESPRIE TOWERS



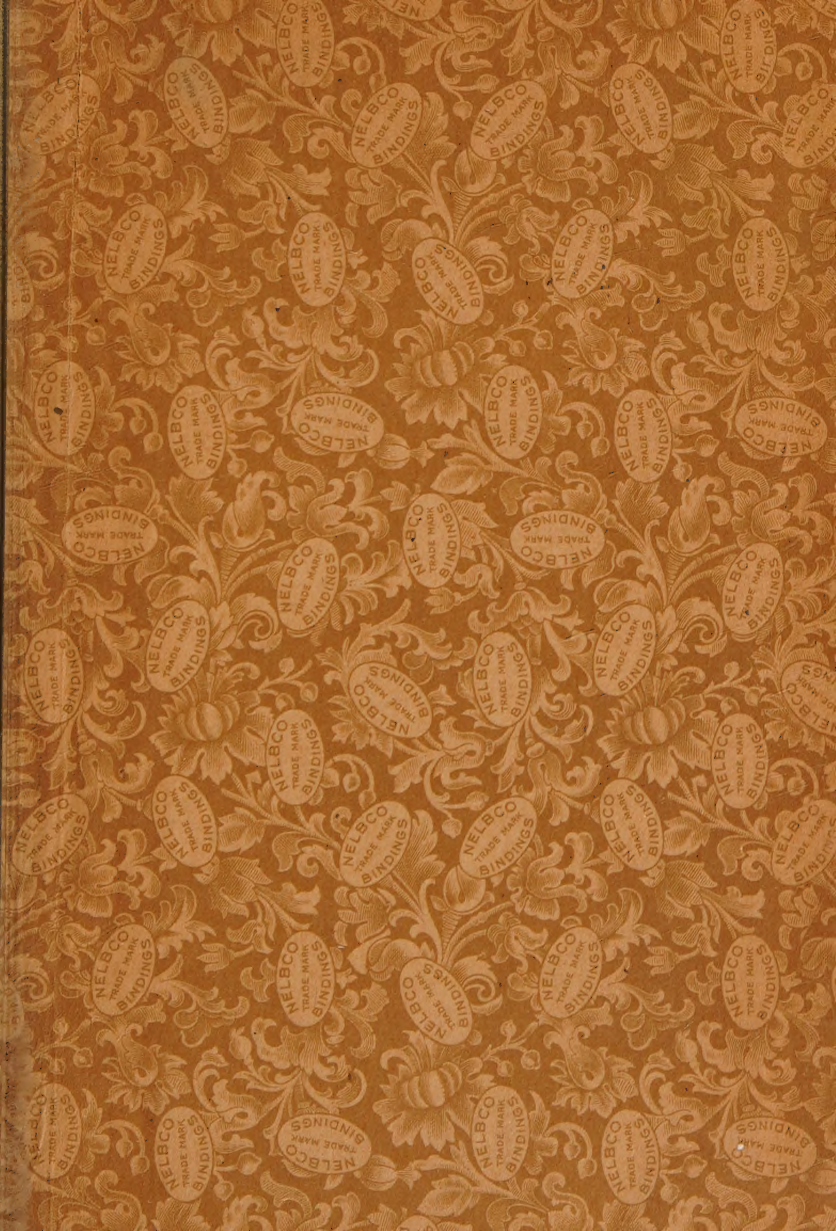
THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON

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VESPRIE TOWERS





# VESPRIE TOWERS

A NOVEL

BY

THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON

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BOOK I  
THE VESPRIE LUCK



## CHAPTER I

### THE RAINBOW TOPAZ

As late as the time of Elizabeth there were few richer families in England than the Vespries. They were always as remarkable for their wild and adventurous nature as they were for their wealth.

The Vespries felt that Vesprie Towers was not so much the residence of the family as part of the family itself. To conceive the one without the other was impossible with a Vesprie with any imagination.

In this as in many other points the Vespries resembled a Spanish more than an English family.

The inheritance received from his forefathers was felt to be sacred by every Vesprie heir. No picture, or weapon, or coat of armour, or gem or any other relic of the great family had ever been removed from any room or hall or gallery to be turned into money. The Crown jewels were not more sacred than were the Vesprie heirlooms. And the Vespries seemed to feel, although there was no opportunity of acting upon their peculiarity, that the son, inasmuch as he had more ancestors than his father, was one degree more sacred than the man that begot him. But in order for a family to keep itself up on such lines as these it must have a virility far greater than the Vespries owned.

With every generation the family became poorer and poorer, and the mortgages upon the land became heavier and heavier ; for the Vespries followed the fashion as with families where gambling is the dominant vice.

But it was a part of the Vesprie religion that whatsoever money might be borrowed on the estate, no inch of land should be sold out and out. In fact some mysterious power called the "luck of the Vespries" would always intervene at crucial moments to save the Vesprie lands.

So long as the Vesprie family was able to hold its place among the other patrician families of Great Britain, and was able to stand up vigorously in the battle of life, it was too actively employed to find much time to speculate on what is called "luck." It was when the family had dropped away from its natural environments—when its energies were numbed by the great paralysers, poverty, that it commenced declaiming about its luck.

The idea of the family luck expressed itself in many forms. For instance, although the family had become penniless, they still considered themselves the owners of the Vesprie lands—of the pictures and antique furniture in the house. For, as they argued, were they not the inheritors of the Vesprie luck ?

The family believed that their descent from Lady Godiva was amply verified by the fact of having in their possession a topaz called sometimes the "Godiva Jewel," and sometimes the "Luck of the Vespries."

There was a tradition in the family that when Lady Godiva devoted her wealth to founding the monastery at Coventry, and gave her whole treasure to it, she sent for skilful goldsmiths who, with all the gold and silver she had, made crosses and images of saints which she devoutly disposed thereto ; but she retained one topaz which became an heirloom of the Vesprie family.

This is why another sign was the mirrored rainbow itself in the placid waters of the mere or backwater—a phenomenon so rarely seen (for the water to produce it must be without a ripple) that it was believed in that neighbourhood, though quite erroneously, to be a sign entirely confined to the backwater called the river Vesprie.

Connected with the phenomenon, or rather the maker of the phenomenon, was a power called the “Luck of Vesprie Towers.” Whether the luck of Vesprie Towers was a phenomenon—a spirit governing the rainbow stone—or the phenomenon itself was not very clear. It was a power haunting the Towers and all the lands. In fact the idea of this power seems to have been that of the genius of the Vesprie family. It assumed various shapes. When the seer was a son of the Vespries it took the shape of a lovely girl. When the seer was a daughter of the Vespries it took the more appropriate form of a beautiful young man. Mostly this luck brought about by these powers and portents came in the shape of a good marriage, and the number of heiresses introduced into the family was quite extraordinary. And sometimes it would occur that when the finances of the family had again got low,



the representative was a female possessing all the Vesprie witchery, of which so much has been said in eighteenth century memoirs; and then some wealthy man was sure to come forward, marry the daughter and take the name and arms of the family by royal letters patent.

The last-mentioned fact, the fact that the fortunes of the family had been so often restored by its female members marrying rich men, had caused the Vespries to take a peculiar attitude towards the female representatives of the race—the same attitude as a gypsy tribe takes towards its female members. The theory of feudality assumes that the family characteristics descend in the male line only in the human race. It is the theory of the gypsies that in some families the most remarkable characteristics are transmitted in an exceptional degree through the female. And something like this seems to have been the Vesprie doctrine.

But even when chances in the marriage market refused to turn up, the luck of the Vespries was never baffled.

It is only necessary to mention one or two of these strange incidents. There had been for generations a tradition in the family that the Vespries once possessed the largest quantity of solid gold plate in Europe. And indeed an old inventory showed that the words "gold plate" really meant solid gold and not merely silver-gilt, as it almost invariably means in cases of this kind. The family tradition was no doubt true, and the plate must have been of immense value.

Now no trace of this gold plate could be found in

Vesprie Towers ; and the tradition was that it had been concealed for some reason or another, some said to escape the claws of creditors, and others said to keep it safe from the Protector's soldiers. At the time when the land was on the eve of being sold for the mortgage money a peasant in the employ of the family was trolling in the mere and his hook caught in something. He pulled gently but firmly and raised to the top of the water a piece of gold plate which afterwards proved to be a chocolate cup. But when the article in question reached the surface it broke the line and sank again to the bottom of the mere. The peasant went at once to the Towers and told his master what had occurred ; and the mere was at once dragged, and then a large mass of gold plate and silver-gilt plate was pulled up. Strongly as the Vespries of that time desired to keep the plate in the family, the keeping of the land in the family was a far greater object. The plate not being among the positive heirlooms was sold and realised an immense sum of money, and from this source the mortgage was paid off.

At one time a Vesprie would seem to have restored the family fortunes by a method that did not recommend itself to the Vesprie traditions of honour. At a time when gambling was very common it occurred to a Vesprie to invite gambling friends to the Towers in order to win advantages over them by the aid of the Vesprie luck. During the play he used to wear, concealed in his breast, the rainbow topaz, and the effect of this was that he made vast winnings from guest after guest, until

at last no one would consent to playing at Vesprie Towers.

The gambling and extravagances and other vices could have made hundreds of thousands melt away, and they did. The land was again mortgaged—mortgaged—mortgaged.

But in spite of everything the Vespries would still have remained as the possessors of a moderate affluence had it not been for a new craze about the Vesprie luck.

At the time when all England had run mad about George Hudson the railway king, Martin Vesprie indulged in enormous speculations in railways. He formed a friendship indeed, as far as a man of family could form a friendship with the linen-draper; and every “tip” that Hudson offered to him was acted upon with childlike faith. And before the railway mania had time to reach its climax in 1847—Vesprie had become worse than penniless, in fact insolvent.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ISLAND OF POVERTY

FROM this moment the extraordinary isolation of the Vespries from their own class began. The effect of the corn laws was felt, of course, by most of the estates in that neighbourhood, and the result was that almost all of them had changed hands.

One property, for instance, had been bought by the son of a wealthy cotton printer ; another estate had been bought by a few capitalists who had made a colossal fortune by bearing Turkish and Egyptian bonds at the time of the great fall in those securities ; another had been bought by a speculator in Argentine securities before the great fall in Argentines. These wealthy folk would have been willing enough to foregather with the Vespries on account of their *sang azur*, but neither Vesprie nor his wife would tolerate them on account of the air of smart society which they always put on.

One of the most pleasant results of the invasion of these parvenus was their lavish expenditure, which entirely demoralised the whole neighbourhood. Poor as was Vesprie's father, he and his wife were treated by the farmers and the yokels with that respect which the unprivileged classes are always willing to yield to the privileged classes. Old Mrs. Vesprie, when she drove out in

the pony carriage to make her purchases in Vesprie village and to play—as far as her narrow means would allow—the Lady Bountiful, expected and always got that obeisance which she considered her due. But to play the Lady Bountiful on nothing a year is obviously disheartening. The wives of the new parvenus became the Ladies Bountiful, and at last the Vespries, dropping more and more out of the yokel ken, rarely got bows from the school boys and curtsies from the school girls, and as to the grown-up labourers they ceased to touch their greasy hats.

One would have thought that, encased in an armour of pride as the Vespries were, these changes in the bearing of the labourers would not have been felt by them. But when pride is mixed with vanity matters are different with the fallen ones. The Vespries felt it very acutely.

One result of this life enisled by poverty from the class in which the Vespries ought to have moved was that their attitude towards the everyday life moving outside them was something like that of Don Quixote towards the life of the Spain of his time. To them the world around them was as picturesque as it had been in the lives of any of their successive ancestors. Vesprie retained all the formal courtesy of the manners of a previous century.

But if the effect of the isolation of their family life showed itself strongly in Vesprie, it showed itself in a much more marked degree in his little daughter Violet. And yet the style and bearing of the child was as much unlike that of her father



as it was unlike that of the young children of her own standing and years.

There is no more characteristic sign of the time than the fact that an old family like the Vespries could through poverty alone be entirely shut out from the class to which they belonged.

If the well-to-do people in the county in which Vesprie took rank let the Vespries drop out of their circle so completely that their names were never mentioned, it was inevitable that this should be the case. Life is short—there are but few hours in the day—a few days in the week—a few weeks in the time devoted to house parties, gatherings at shooting boxes and such-like social assemblages. And the county people would have been quite willing to receive the Vespries if they had not been too poor to go out or to receive at home.

On the whole they would most likely rather have gone to an expensive function at Vesprie Towers, or at a London house belonging to the Vespries, than they would have gone to an expensive function at the country or town place of, say, a wealthy soap-boiler or a Brazilian diamond merchant. But then the one thing wanted was the expensive function, and was it the fault of the county people if the Vespries could not give an expensive function?

Another cause of the marvellous isolation of the Vespries is this—that down to the time of Vesprie's father the family had been Roman Catholics, and the major part of their friends were of the same persuasion, and when Vesprie's father turned Protestant they were already too poor for the paternal anxiety of the mother Church, and they

were also too poor to be of any account with the grandees of the Protestant Church. And so between these two stools they had already fallen to the ground even before the great loss in the railway mania already mentioned.

The Vespries were quite an exceptionally strong and healthy stock, although far from a prolific one. Violet and her brother Lawrence succeeded to the splendid constitution of the Vespries.

All domestic work had now to be done by Mrs. Vesprie and the two children, and by the old servant, Mrs. Jordan, who was an admirable exemplar of the old type of domestic which is now nearly extinct in England. Loyalty to the Vespries was almost a religion with her. She was a middle-aged woman, blue-eyed, fair, freckled and with a thick crop of little sandy curls as thick and short as the back of a Newfoundland dog, but with the consistence of sheep's wool.

In this division of the domestic duties it was the little boy's part to get up in the morning, light the fire, clean the knives and boots and do other things of a kindred nature. The little girl had many duties ; among others she had that of attending to the poultry and dovecote. Her affection for the animal world, especially for birds, made this a very pleasant duty to her. Of pigeons she was especially fond, and her attachment to them was reciprocated.

The Vespries were all very skilful with the rod, and the river and mere were full of fish—notably of trout ; consequently a fish dinner was a very frequent meal.

It was Mrs. Vesprie's fine sense of caste that prevented the children being brought up on lines foreign to the true patrician nature. Still, they had the feeling that they were living in a besieged camp surrounded by aliens if not by foes.

There is no more remarkable sign of the great change that has come over society within the last few years than the fact that so old and distinguished a family as the Vespries should have ceased so entirely to be in touch with the county families simply on account of their poverty.

Lawrence was a very singular boy, and no doubt endowed with remarkable gifts. He had a share of the lawless imagination of the Vespries, and although in other matters his mind was prosaic, it was as much possessed by the Vesprie luck as his father's and sister's. He was constantly fuming over their poverty, not as a disgrace but as an obstacle in life. The Vesprie luck was seldom absent from his mind, since it was upon him devolved the family duty of making wealth somehow to restore the family. He was sagacious enough even as a child to know that the depth of poverty into which they had sunk made it impossible that the Vesprie luck could be brought about by marrying an heiress. His head was filled with dreams of going to the colonies, becoming rich, and in that way restoring Vesprie Towers to its pristine glories.

Having imagined that he should make money in the colonies, it soon seemed to him that the wealth was already there, waiting for him to fetch it.

The children had got so used to their isolation that they were as reluctant to go into the village

as their father was reluctant to let them go, and their only glimpse of the outer world was like a glimpse of a panorama. Lawrence would under no circumstances have associated with boys of his own age whom he could not patronise, and the known poverty of the family would have made it difficult for him to find many henchmen in the Vesprie village even if he had wished to do so. There was one of his own age belonging to the labouring class, however, with whom he presently came to be on intimate terms of friendship, a youth of remarkable qualities, and destined to play a leading part in the luck of the Vesprie family.

## CHAPTER III

### A VISIT FROM "THE OGRE"

ABOUT this time the entire household was put into a state of great expectation by a letter addressed to Rowland Vesprie. It was from Messrs. Walton and Walton, the solicitors, and ran thus :—

“ Our client, Mr. Brandon, the mortgagee of Vesprie Towers, is paying a flying visit to England, and we have advised him to inspect the property. This he has decided to do, and he will call upon you some day during the present week.”

The whole family were now on the *qui vive* for the advent of the visitor. Day after day passed, and the mortgagee did not make his appearance, and it was at last assumed that the invasion had either been postponed or abandoned. One day, however, Vesprie and his son Lawrie having gone out to fish in the river, had left Mrs. Vesprie seated in the drawing-room, near the carved oak fireplace ornamented with the Vesprie arms. The room was panelled with oak and had seats of oak in the window recesses. It had a comfortable, almost a snug, appearance, except that the old Turkey carpet was worn brown and threadbare and in some places



actually in holes. The lady was speculating upon the great daily enigma that occupied her life—the question of ways and means. Suddenly the door opened and Mrs. Jordan came in, exclaiming in a voice of suppressed excitement, “He’s come, mum! Looks for all the world just like a methody preacher in his dress, and jist like a cod’s head and shoulders in hisself. But he certainly looks very kind.” And she handed Mrs. Vesprie a card on which was written “Mr. Brandon.”

Mrs. Vesprie showed great surprise at his personal appearance, and no wonder. Never was there such a meek-looking gentleman seen before. And yet assuredly he was no beauty. He was a somewhat round-shouldered, short-necked, fair-complexioned, bald-headed gentleman of about sixty, with large blue eyes, expressing an extraordinary benevolence, and a large thick-lipped mouth whose protuberant lips in some odd way did not suggest the animalism which such lips usually suggest, but seemed in harmony with the benevolent eyes. His mouth was never entirely closed, for he breathed through it as if there was a stoppage in the nostrils. His voice, although not at all unpleasant, was rather thick.

It is very likely that Mr. Brandon knew not only about the penniless condition of these representatives of a great family, but also about the increased pride which so often comes with such a position, for he approached Mrs. Vesprie with an air of as much deference as if she had been a duchess, guessing no doubt that this air of deference would be like a breath of paradise to the poor lady.

He told Mrs. Vesprie that his object in calling was to see the great estate of which he had the honour to be the mortgagee; and asked permission to see such rooms in the building as it would be quite convenient for him to see, and be allowed to walk through the grounds.

"From the little that I know of business matters," said Mrs. Vesprie, after the gentleman had taken a seat, "I think you have more right upon this property now than we have."

"Not exactly so," said Mr. Brandon. "You have still what the lawyers call, I believe, the equity of redemption, and in point of fact you are still the owners, nominally at least, of the estate."

"I should really be very grateful to you, Mr. Brandon, if you would tell me what is now our position here?"

It was evident that Mr. Brandon had the greatest desire to make the interview as agreeable as possible.

"It is yours," he said, "subject to the discharge of the mortgage debt."

"But I understand," said she, "that the mortgage debt is considerably greater than the value of the estate, owing to so many of the farmers being frightened into giving up their farms on account of Free Trade, and consequently ceasing to pay rent."

"Temporarily that is so," said he, "but let us hope that the depreciation in the value of land will be only temporary. You will remember, madam, that although the ruin of British agriculture was

predicted in '46, in the very next year, notwithstanding the increase in the importation of wheat, prices became higher than they had been for many years."

"Yes," said the lady; "but your solicitor, when he called, said that that was entirely an accident—the extremely bad harvest of 1847, and the outcry among all the farmers in the country is for the reduction of rents."

"As I said before, madam, let us hope for the best."

"In the meantime," said the lady, "you are a heavy loser."

"Yes," said Mr. Brandon, "that is so. My solicitors, Messrs. Walton and Walton, after the death of their previous client, Mr. Beggs, recommended the mortgage of the Vesprie estate to me without certainly taking into prospect the repeal of the Corn Laws, and it is for me to bear the brunt of their mistake. In the present condition of things the Vesprie estate would not now realise, if sold, the money advanced upon it."

"This is unfortunate for you, Mr. Brandon," said Mrs. Vesprie, in a tone which showed that she had been impressed by the sort of atmosphere of kindness radiated, as it were, from the visitor.

"Yes, undoubtedly, it is unfortunate for me," said he, "but I have still plenty and to spare. Everything is disposed by Providence; and the loss on this estate does not distress me—not in the least, on my own account."

"Then on what account does it distress you, Mr. Brandon?"

"Well, madam, it does not really distress me at all. What I meant was that I intended to leave all my property to benefit the Moravian cause of which an ancestor of my dear wife's was one of the founders—to endow a Home for destitute girls. And the more my property is diminished the less there will be for the good cause, and I cannot but regret that. But as I have said, madam, everything is in the hands of Providence."

"I understand," said Mrs. Vesprie, "that even now if the money were to be repaid, the Vesprie property would belong to the Vesprie family as it has done for so many generations?"

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Brandon, "that is so, and for your sake as well as for the sake of the good cause, I sincerely hope it will be found possible for Mr. Vesprie to redeem the land."

"Ah," said Mrs. Vesprie with a sigh, "in such days as these the chances are greatly against such good fortune!"

Her speech was cut short by a startling exclamation.

"The Vesprie luck, mother dear! don't forget the Vesprie luck."

"Violet," exclaimed Mrs. Vesprie, reproachfully.

The words had come from a soft childish voice. It was little Violet Vesprie who, dangling a sun bonnet in her hand, passing in front of a modern French window which had been queerly inserted in the wall of the ancient building, had overheard every word of the conversation.

She was standing in the attitude that soldiers call "standing at ease," the main part of the weight of

the body supported by the weight of the one while the other leg was slightly bent.

Mr. Brandon rose from his chair and stood and gazed at the child upon whom the sun was falling aslant so as to illuminate two-thirds of her face. His dull blue eyes seemed to protrude and his lips to grow wide apart. Mrs. Vesprie saw that it was not merely the loveliness of the child which caused so much emotion in the visitor. Something else had stirred the man's soul to its very depths. Mr. Brandon put his hand upon the golden head and began stroking it gently in an inexpressibly fond way, while his eyes moistened. Then turning to Mrs. Vesprie he said, making a great effort to speak, "You have indeed the Vesprie luck. You prize this possession as I should—more than all the Vesprie lands, and more than all the money advanced upon them."

The child looked up into his face, and, smiling sweetly, said, "Why, Lawrie and I used to call you the Ogre! But that is because we did not know you. You look so kind. . . ."

"Violet!" said Mrs. Vesprie, in a vexed and angry tone.

"You look so kind," said the child, "that I think I may tell you a secret, sir. My brother Lawrie, when he gets to be a man, is going abroad, and he is going to bring home lots and lots of money, and then Lawrie will be very rich and he will pay you. That is what he told me only last night. But you won't be in a hurry, sir. It will take some time to do—so Lawrie says!"



Mr. Brandon's eyes became more moist still as he said, "May I kiss you?"

"Yes," said the child; "I should like you to, because you look so kind."

He stooped, and as he kissed her on the forehead seemed as though he were putting his lips to something more sacred than human flesh. The child then walked out into the garden.

Mr. Brandon looked after her in silence. He was evidently trying hard to master the deep emotion the child's appearance had caused within him. When he turned round to Mrs. Vesprie he said, "You will forgive me for being overcome by the sight of that child. I had children once, and have lost them. The last, little Edie, I lost not a month ago. She was not so lovely as your child. But she was part of my very life."

"I am grieved," said Mrs. Vesprie, "that so good a man should have sustained so terrible a loss. I feel—I know that you are very good, and I am distressed to think that you have lost large sums of money by our unfortunate affair."

Mrs. Vesprie put out her hand and Mr. Brandon took it, and there was something quite magnetic in the grasp between the aristocratic lady and the plebeian Moravian which each of them understood. But the fact is that in really good people there is always a kind of good breeding, exactly as in selfish people there is always bad breeding.

After a pause, Mr. Brandon said, "What did the child mean when she said that she used to call me the Ogre?"

“Oh,” said Mrs. Vesprie with an air of deep mortification, “my husband has a foolish way of talking about family matters before the children, and as the power of a mortgagee over the land is so great, the children got into the way—the unreasoning way of resenting that power.”

“I see,” said Mr. Brandon, laughing. “But the sweet child perceived at once that the Ogre did not wear a particularly devouring look.”

“I never saw her take to anyone in that way before. She is most wilful in her likes and dislikes — most wilful,” said Mrs. Vesprie. “There seemed to be quite an attraction between you.”

“You do not know how happy you make me by saying that,” said Mr. Brandon.

There was silence between them. Then Mr. Brandon said, “It is mainly the deep interest that I feel in Vesprie Towers—in this relic of antiquity—that has impelled me to ask your permission to see it and indeed to ramble over it, and through the park.”

“I am sorry,” said Mrs. Vesprie, “that my husband is not in at the moment.”

“I shall enjoy roaming over the place alone more than anything else,” said Mr. Brandon, as he passed through the French window. “I will take the outside of the Towers first.”

“You will scarcely be able to understand the plan of the house without referring to this little book,” said Mrs. Vesprie, rising and taking the booklet from a side table. “It is the Vesprie Guide, and was compiled by our local antiquary.”

Mr. Brandon made a bow that was so sincere that it became almost graceful in spite of the awkward movement of his body, and left Mrs. Vesprie alone.

Mrs. Vesprie looked after him thoughtfully, for Mr. Brandon's evident love at first sight of the child had set her dreaming.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LITTLE LADY-GUIDE

MR. BRANDON had taken the booklet that Mrs. Vesprie lent him and sauntered down the pleasaunce. Such interest, however, as he had begun to feel in the old park and ruins of Vesprie Abbey was eclipsed, or perhaps it was absorbed in the interest he felt in the child. Suddenly he came upon her in the stableyard. A flock of pigeons were flying around her and sitting upon her shoulder and her golden head, the hair of which was so thick that she seemed to suffer no inconvenience from their claws; and some were putting their beaks into her mouth as though kissing her.

“ You feed the pigeons, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes,” said she, “ and the poultry, too. There are many—many things that I do now since all the servants have left, except Mrs. Jordan. But Lawrie lights the fires and brushes the shoes; and he *can* make them shine. You should just see them! Good-bye! I am now going into the poultry yard.”

This sign of the family poverty touched Mr. Brandon to the quick; but he felt powerless to do anything for them—save in the matter of rent—walled round as he knew the family to be by pride.

"The pigeons seem very fond of you, my dear," said Mr. Brandon, following her.

"Yes," said she, "and I am very fond of them. They know all about the Vesprie luck and when it will come. That's what Lawrie says."

And then she began to prattle about the Vesprie luck and the various signs of it, from which Mr. Brandon gathered that between the birds of Vesprie Park and the Vespries there had always been sympathy; that a very rare bird, the golden oriole, was very specially associated with the family, and also that the Vesprie pigeons had from time immemorial been associated with the Vesprie luck. He gathered that when any misfortune was looming in the near distance for the Vespries it was indicated by the pigeons, and indeed by the rooks and by the Vesprie birds generally. He gathered that the pigeons and the rooks dwindled in number and the cooings and cawings became not only less frequent but more languid; and that even the song birds showed a sense of approaching trouble. He gathered further that the approach of good fortune to the Vespries was indicated by the vivacity of all the birds. This charming nonsense seemed scarcely nonsense as it came from the child's prattling lips.

As Mr. Brandon moved meditatively away he murmured, "Sweet, sweet child! Rent, of course, I shall never get, but they shall never be disturbed until I do what I thought of doing with the property."

As he was sauntering around looking at the building, he was rejoiced to see the child running after him, and he stopped.

“ Would you like me to show you the banqueting hall, and the panel pictures ? ” said Violet.

“ Certainly,” said Mr. Brandon, “ there is nothing I should like so much, if you will be so kind.”

And he let her lead him into the house.

She took him into the great entrance hall, in one corner of which was a staircase up which she led him. This took them to an enclosed gallery which ran round the inner part of the three sides of the building, and gave access to the rooms in the upper storey.

When they reached the magnificent room which the child called the banqueting hall, which occupied the wide space over the gateway, deserted as it was and empty as it was, the bright summer sun pouring through the great mullioned window and illuminating the high-pitched roof of oak and the shattered remains of old oak carving and panelling, black as ink, gave a cheerful aspect even to such a scene. They went to the great window and looked out over the Home Park. She then pointed out to him the pictures on the walls.

The pictures interested him ; but what absorbed Mr. Brandon most was the mixture of intellectual force combined with childishness in the little girl. She seemed to know every picture and to know about the character of the person delineated, and as she prattled on he would be alternately struck with the precocity and with the infantine character of her mind.

She took him along the corridor to another room where there was an extraordinary black oak antique chair which had at once attracted Mr. Brandon's



attention. It was Anglo-Norman in shape, and originally, no doubt, the massive oak had been plain and uncarved, but now the sides and back of the chair were partially covered with carvings of different epochs, in which the Tudor rose predominated.

"Ah!" said Violet, "you are looking at the lucky chair. They say that if you fall asleep in it the Vesprie luck will come to you in a dream."

"The Vesprie luck!" murmured Brandon; "even this child is bitten with the gross superstition."

"It came to me again last night," continued Violet, "and it was a wonderful dream. Shall I tell it to you?"

"Yes," said Brandon, for his dread of superstition was overmastered by his desire to listen to anything that the child would talk about.

"It came to me," said she, "as I sat on this chair and fell asleep just before bedtime. I saw everything as plainly as I see you; and even now when I shut my eyes I can see it all again. I thought I heard a voice say, 'If Violet lives here alone, like the princess in the fairy story, the Vesprie luck will come to her.' You know the story of the princess who slept for a hundred years in a tower until the spell was broken by the prince who was to come and wake her with a kiss? And then I found that Lawrie and my father and mother had all left me, and that I was lying on a couch, and I seemed to be both awake and asleep, and alone like the princess in the fairy story. I thought I lay there in the Towers alone and waited day after day for the Vesprie luck, and I thought there came

one day a knock at the door and I rose and opened it. And there stood the prince, and he seemed in great distress about something."

"Go on," said Mr. Brandon; "you interest me very much."

"Well, I noticed something quite wonderful in his eyes. They seemed to show what he was thinking about. And I said, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'I am the Vesprie luck—the good luck of the Vespries and my own bad luck.'"

"Oh, did he say that?" said Mr. Brandon; "and what did he say after that?"

"He said, 'Come outside and walk with me and see what you shall see!' And he took me by the hand and led me out, and I saw that everything round me was changed as if the fairies had changed it. All the place was restored—the yew trees were all clipped into beautiful shapes and the fountains were all springing up from the lawns. And then he put his arm round my waist and kissed me on the forehead and I lifted up my face and kissed him. And then I woke and found myself sitting in this chair—was it not a wonderful dream?"

"Very wonderful indeed," said Mr. Brandon, who had already begun to feel that the image of this child was coming between him and his own dream of a Home for destitute girls.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MIRRORED RAINBOW

MR. BRANDON now plainly saw that, to the child, Vesprie Towers was a part of her own being. She seemed unable to imagine her own existence apart from the Towers, or the Towers apart from herself.

"Would you like to see the old arches of the abbey and the mere? Nobody can show the ruins to you so well as I can."

"Why not?" said Mr. Brandon, taking the little soft fingers in his own.

"Because they're haunted," she said, "and almost everybody is afraid except Lawrie and me, and even Lawrie seems rather afraid, but you mustn't tell him I said so."

"And you are not afraid, then, yourself?"

"No," she said. "I like the spirits and they like me, especially the water fairies of the mere."

"Oh, but you must not believe in such heathen stories as these about water fairies! The only spirits are the angels of the Lord who are always watching over us."

Meanwhile the summer clouds in front of them were darkening and a shower seemed imminent. But these two were so absorbed in each other that they gave it no heed until Mr. Brandon exclaimed,

“Look at that beautiful rainbow in front of us ! ”

Then the child passed into a state of great excitement, and clasping his fingers in her little silky ones she said, “Run—run to the water and let us see if the sun has painted the mirrored rainbow ! ”

Mr. Brandon was evidently a poor runner, but he did his best to keep up with the child, and when they reached the water's edge they perceived the fascinating phenomenon of the mirrored rainbow.

The child dropped his hand and clasping her own hands behind her began to chant a sort of incantation—

“Vesprie luck shall never die,  
While the rainbow in the sky  
Makes a rainbow in the water  
For a sign to son or daughter.”

Then she stood quite still with flashing eyes and parted lips watching the rainbow till it faded. She then pointed to the ruins and said, “That's where we are going now ! ”

Mr. Brandon stood and looked at the ruins in silence for some time. They stood upon a somewhat rocky elevation which was scarcely big enough to be called more than a knoll. Close to it was the mere which was fed by an extremely circuitous backwater of the river. This backwater was originally the river itself, but during the time when so much of the traffic of England was borne by water, a very wide and perfectly straight canal had been dug from one arm of the old river to the other. This backwater was called the old river. To the right the serpentine course, as it neared the mere,

suddenly narrowed and was nearly concealed by the trees for a space beneath the rise on which the ruins of the old abbey stood. So circuitous indeed was the line of the stream that the two irregular lines of trees from the two banks seemed to meet at the end of the view, leaving, however, a narrow shaftlike opening—a sort of telescope made of green foliage, through which poured the light, softened and yet strangely enriched in its passage. Through this verdurous orifice could be seen, on the little hill, the ruins of Vesprie Abbey, the quiet pathetic remains of foregone generations of Vesprie ancestry. The ivy climbed to the very top of one or two isolated arches, and the lonely gables, which had been long left by the crumbling side walls and roofs to carry on alone the war with Time.

The pedestrian, following the course of the backwater as it narrowed, was surprised to come suddenly upon the mere, which covered a large area of the lower land lying around the abbey hill.

The mere was oblong and grew narrower until it ended in the backwater again.

They now turned back towards the Towers. Mr. Brandon re-entered at the French window and there the child left him, to go to her beloved pigeons.

## CHAPTER VI

### A LENIENT MORTGAGEE

WHEN Mr. Brandon re-entered the room in which he had left Mrs. Vesprie after wandering alone for a while round the estate, he found her alone.

"My little girl has been acting as cicerone to you, Mr. Brandon," she said; "she has been telling me something about it. There is nothing that she likes so much as to act as cicerone over Vesprie Towers. I hope she has not wearied you?"

"Wearied me, madam?" said Brandon, in a tone that seemed to say, "Could an angel from the skies have wearied me?" "She is a very wonderful child, Mrs. Vesprie, a very wonderful child."

"It is very kind of you to take so much interest in her, Mr. Brandon. But she has clearly only been showing you her best side. Her faults you have yet to learn."

"Faults?" said Brandon in a dreamy tone. "What faults can such a child have, I wonder?"

"First," said Mrs. Vesprie, "she is what my servant calls a regular tomboy. The only person of her own age that she has ever been with is her brother, whom she adores, and he has all the rough ways of a boy with athletic tastes. She never knew a little girl in her life; she does not know a single child's game that is not a boy's. In climbing trees



she would put most boys to shame, I think. Her games are peg-top, cricket, football, and running races with her brother, and—and boxing.”

“Dear me,” said Mr. Brandon; “a wonderful child indeed!”

“Yes, and she has many lovable qualities. But tell me, Mr. Brandon,” said Mrs. Vesprie, “what is our actual position here? I suppose that you take the rents of the land in payment of your interest and that the rents are not enough to pay the interest?”

“Yes, that is so.”

“But what about the Towers? Rumours have reached us that you intend to pull the place down.”

Mr. Brandon made no answer, but stood looking meditatively out of the window, when suddenly his face was illuminated by a smile. Violet, who was passing along the pleasaunce, was smiling and kissing her hand to him. He turned to Mrs. Vesprie and said, “Even if the Towers were at present legally and fully mine, it would not follow that I should want to pull it down, although undoubtedly the site is very specially adapted to my scheme of endowing the twentieth century with a Moravian temple.”

“But what about the occupancy, Mr. Brandon?”

Mr. Brandon knew from conversation with his solicitor the simple, unreasoning pride of the family. He also knew their delusion as to the Vesprie luck. Moreover, his heart had gone out to that child in a narvellous way, and he longed for some opportunity of benefiting her without rousing the jealous, suspicious pride of the family.

“Mrs. Vesprie,” he said, “I consider the place

so absolutely unlettable that I couldn't consent to take any rent at all. It is really a kind service to me for this fine old relic of antiquity to be left in the care of the representative of the illustrious family with whom it is associated. I wish Mr. Vesprie would grant me the privilege of an arrangement of this kind."

At this moment Mr. Vesprie came in.

"I could not consent to such an arrangement," said he. "That would be quite impossible. I should become a mere caretaker. And I have every confidence that this mortgage will be paid off—some day."

Mr. Brandon glanced at Mrs. Vesprie and saw on her face an expression in which dismay seemed blended with anger. Turning to Vesprie he then said, "Then if rent is to be paid, I am a conscientious man and shall only name a low rent. I suggest that you can pay into my bank eighty pounds a year for the occupancy of the Towers and the gardens and the immediate grounds, and retain absolute freedom to use the deer park and the mere, and you can pay the rent quarterly or half-yearly, or annually, or whenever you like."

"Eighty pounds a year," said Vesprie. "I am a poor business man, but surely the rent is very, very low."

Again Mr. Brandon glanced at Mrs. Vesprie and saw the same expression.

"Why, the fruit from the orchard alone," continued Vesprie, "why the fruit from the orchard alone——"

"The fruit from the orchard?" Mr. Brandon

interposed. "Why, Mr. Vesprie, that remark alone shows how poor a business man you are! If that fruit was within ten miles of Covent Garden, rest assured I should ask you much more. But the railways by their exorbitant freightage have managed to destroy market gardening. Eighty pounds a year," he continued decisively, "is *the* rent that I have fixed for Vesprie Towers." Then he said in a still more decisive tone, "Eighty pounds a year."

Mrs. Vesprie's eyes grew moist with gratitude as she looked at him. She knew full well that the witchery of the child had entirely conquered the mortgagee, and she also knew that the good man would have preferred to let them live rent free.

"I will tell my solicitor to send you an agreement for signature for the occupancy of the place at that rent," said he.

And he took his leave.

After Mr. Brandon was gone, Mrs. Vesprie burst into tears.

"My dear Rowland," she said, "what a baby you are, and what a source of ruin this family pride is! We have two children to bring up upon nothing. You yourself could not earn five shillings to save your life, and through you the children are being brought up on the same lines. Apart from the rent it would have been a terrible plight for us to live here even to pay taxes, buy food and clothes and firing out of nothing a year."

"And you would really have the family live on charity?" said Vesprie.

"Rather than starve; and yet," said Mrs.

Vesprie, "I have more of the true pride of the class to which we belong than you have! In a choice between charity and starvation I choose to accept charity for the sake of the children."

"You take a most unphilosophical view of the question," said Vesprie. "And you always seem to ignore the influence of—of—the Vesprie luck."

"My poor children!" said Mrs. Vesprie with a sigh. "I can think of nothing more cruel—than to bring them up to believe that they are not penniless, and to feed them on dreams of the Vesprie luck!"

"Ah! You are not a Vesprie," said Rowland Vesprie. And he left her alone.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE RULING PASSION

SEVEN years had elapsed since the incidents recorded in the last chapter, and still the Vespries remained at the Towers, and still they paid no rent, and still no rent was ever asked for ; indeed, Mr. Brandon's agent seemed to have had instructions to let the family live there rent free, if they would only consent to do so.

The produce of the orchard and garden, and the sale of a valuable picture in the Vesprie gallery, now and then, contrary to family traditions, proved sufficient to pay the taxes and rates and to keep the Vespries not only well fed, but well clad.

Meanwhile Lawrence Vesprie became restless and irritable, and at last announced his intention of going to South Africa to make his fortune. This gave distress to the family, but still they looked upon it as being a move towards the Vesprie luck.

Another picture was sold and Lawrence went out to Cape Town with one hundred and fifty pounds in his pocket. About a year after Lawrie's departure from Vesprie Towers a great trouble befell Violet and her father. Mrs. Vesprie died suddenly. And so the inhabitants of the island of poverty had dwindled to two—Rowland Vesprie and his daughter Violet.

Both Vesprie and Violet were skilful trout

fishers, and they were both good shots, and many a luncheon and dinner was the result of their skill. When she could find time from her domestic duties Violet was very fond of putting on her thick shoes and short dress and walking beside her father with a gun.

But she now had to do everything that was done in the two or three rooms they occupied of the endless rooms at the Towers. Rising early in the morning, she took her father's coffee to him in bed—for being a Vesprie he felt himself entitled to little luxuries—swept the rooms, dusted the furniture, arranged with the few tradesmen's boys who called with the meat and bread, and the milk; prepared the omelette for luncheon—for Vesprie could not do without an omelette—went out afterwards for a walk with him, or for a row on the mere.

It was not until after dinner that she found time to interest and amuse herself in her own way, that is to say, by reading Shakespeare and every drama of every dramatist that she could find in the library. It was, perhaps, the theatrical more than the poetic part among the dramatists that originally attracted her. There was not a farce or a melodrama or a comedy in such collections as the "London Stage," or the British or Bell's Theatre, that she had not read and studied over and over again. And as she read she would every now and then spring up from her seat and act the part, marching up and down as if on the stage.

She was in truth a born actress, and had she been trained for the stage in childhood, a splendid career would have been before her, if she had chosen.



After she had occupied herself for two or three hours in this way she would lapse into silence and sit quiet as a stone, her face resting between her two palms.

Now and then among the very few letters that ever reached the Towers the postman would bring a hasty scrawl from Lawrie, each one filled with wild stories of wealth in immediate prospect. Vesprie accepted these wild stories.

One morning, however, the news came that his son, who had joined the irregular cavalry at the Cape, had been killed through a fall from his horse. The terrible effect of this news upon Vesprie did not come entirely or even mainly from his affection for his son. But he felt that it sounded the death knell of the Vesprie luck. Around this fantastic source of hope every tendril of his life had been winding and clinging. Lawrie would make money in some way or another, and come back and pay off the mortgage, and keep the Vesprie luck in the Vesprie family. But now it was not merely that there was no one left to bring back the wealth. There was no one left to carry on the family but Violet. And how dare he hope for a wealthy marriage now that the family had become so pauperised? And without a wealthy marriage how could Violet be the means of bringing about the Vesprie luck?

The Vesprie family would become extinct, and he, having lost his hope in the Vesprie luck, now began to fade away day by day. He would sit in a listless way in one room all day long. But the worst feature of this collapse was that he took a dislike

to Violet—the sweet child who loved him so dearly. He began to resent her being a girl. She seemed to have come into existence by pushing away a possible boy. This was heart-breaking to Violet, and she was profoundly miserable.

Great as was her own grief at the loss of her brother, it was soon swamped in her greater grief at the loss of her father's love.

One morning when Violet took his coffee up to her father she noticed an extraordinary change in him. The melancholia that she had noticed so much had been replaced by an extraordinary state of exhilaration.

“A sudden light has come to me about the Vesprrie luck,” said he. “I was as usual thinking all night about it, when a sort of illumination flashed through me, and I became a changed man. Vesprrie Towers will after all be restored exactly according to the old plan. I used to think there could be no Vesprrie luck because there could be no Vesprrie to live in the Towers. But now I know that *you* are the Vesprrie that will carry on the family. Yes, it is you that will find it,” said Vesprrie. “You must devote your life to seeking for it, and I think that you will find it in the mere.”

Violet was greatly puzzled. She did not know that mysterious law of the human mind which in the most literal sense makes the wish father to the thought. The feeling that the Vesprrie luck was dead had brought about the melancholia; but all the time the man's mind was clamouring for the support of the old idea of the Vesprrie luck, and just when the melancholia was on the verge of

passing into actual insanity, a dominant idea returned and asserted itself and set the mental wheels turning in the old direction, and the mind sought and found another explanation of the Vesprie luck.

From this moment Vesprie's mind was running on finding a treasure, and it became something like a monomania with him. A great portion of the day was spent either on the mere, in the boat, or by its margin, for it was evident that his idea of the finding of the treasure was connected with the mere.

Violet at last grew as concerned at this new obsession as she had been at the old one, and tried, but in vain, to talk him out of it. She became still more alarmed to learn, as she did one night, that it induced somnambulism.

One evening she was disturbed by a noise in the passages. On going out of the room she saw her father partly dressed walk along the passage, unbolt the door, and go out upon the pleasaunce. She followed him as he moved rapidly towards the margin of the mere. She then walked beside him; and on looking into his face she found that he was in a state of somnambulism, and she heard him whisper, "Diamonds and rubies—the Vesprie luck!"

Then she saw him make straight for the little skiff moored to the bank and step into it, take the oars and pull out into the centre of the mere. Presently the skiff stopped; then he rose in the boat with an oar in his right hand, which he plunged into the water. Then he again raised the

oar and sat down to row back to the mooring place.

She knew of course that he was dreaming about the lost treasure, and the gold plate he believed to be concealed in the mere.

He stepped from the boat, tied it to the mooring post, and retraced his steps along the path he had previously taken. As he passed her she saw an expression on his face, an expression of exultation and joy ; and in his arms he seemed to be hugging an imaginary treasure and she heard the loud, triumphant whisper, " At last—found at last ! " as he walked along towards the Towers.

She followed him.

She knew that he was fast asleep and would know nothing about it in the morning.

This scene was often repeated ; and in every case Violet followed him, but dared not awaken him.

The strain upon the emotions in Vesprie's mind was evidently telling upon his strength. He seemed to be getting weaker day by day. But Violet had no idea that his end was so near.

One morning he complained of being very much out of sorts. He felt feverish ; he had throbbings in the head. " Violet," said he, " I am dying ; but I die happy now, for I know—as I told you before—I know that the Vesprie luck will come to you ! Now, my dear, you must promise me not to leave Vesprie Towers when I am dead, but to remain here in spite of everything and everybody—remain, and wait for the Vesprie luck. No one can turn you out. Remain and wait ! And now there is another

thing that you have to promise me in order that I may die happy. It is this—that when you are an heiress—as you will be—when the Vesprie luck has made you rich and the owner of Vesprie Towers—free from all mortgages, my dear, free from all mortgages—and offers of marriage are made to you (as there will be, and plenty of them) do as all the Vespries have done—refuse to marry any man who will not take the name of Vesprie ! ”

Violet sat down beside his bed. “ Then you are confident, father,” said she, “ that the Vesprie luck will come some day—confident in spite of everything that points against it ? ”

“ Yes, Violet ! The great distinguishing feature of the Vesprie family is a belief—an unconquerable belief—in the Vesprie luck.”

“ But there is no one to inherit it, father—no one save myself.”

“ It will come to you,” said he. “ Have you yourself no feeling that it will come to you ? ”

“ Well, father, yes. I have something which I think may be called faith in the Vesprie luck.”

“ Try to put it into words, my dear. What is your feeling ? ”

“ That would indeed be very difficult.”

“ Try, Violet—try,” said her father.

“ Well,” said she, “ I can only call it a delightful feeling of the unforeseen—a delightful, delicious sense of the romance and the wonderfulness of the great life outside this little island of poverty, and I feel that even if I were driven out of Vesprie Towers it would only be to encounter, among the innumer-

able chances of life—the—the golden chance of making me the owner of Vesprie Towers, through the Vesprie luck, in the end.”

After Vesprie had remained perfectly silent for some time, he lifted himself up feebly from his pillow, and Violet, perceiving that he had something important to say, bent over him in order to catch every whispered word.

“Violet,” said he, “don’t forget to have the hatchment put up right over the door—the hatchment of the Vespries—you know where to find it.”

Violet gave her promise, and Vesprie sank upon the pillow and the last words she ever heard from his lips were “The Vesprie luck ! ”

And it came about that her father was buried in the old chapel upon the estate, where, as Violet felt, the spirits of his ancestors would be an incomplete gathering without him.

So it happened that poor Violet had to do what surely no other scion of the great family had ever had to do before. She had to get a ladder and nail the hatchment over the door herself with the assistance of one of the tradesmen from Vesprie village.

And now, even if Violet had known where to go, nothing would have persuaded her to leave the house that she had promised her father she never would leave. Besides, as the Towers had the reputation in the neighbourhood of being haunted, it was avoided by the villagers, and she therefore had no feeling of dread at the thought of living there alone.



## CHAPTER VIII

MARTIN REDWOOD

VIOLET had not been living many days in solitude at Vesprie Towers when she received a letter which touched her very deeply. It came from Madeira, and it ran thus :—

“DEAR YOUNG LADY,

“You may possibly remember the Ogre—a certain old gentleman to whom you were so kind, years ago, by showing him over Vesprie Towers and its beautiful park. I am he ; and I have learnt with deep sorrow of the death of your dear father. Of course I cannot guess what your projects now are, but it will give me the deepest pleasure to know that you are still living at the Towers and honouring it with your sweet presence. My return to England will, I trust, be fairly soon. In the meantime if you should want the advice of a friend, or *any other* kind of assistance, you can, I think, have no sincerer friend than

“THE OGRE.

“P.S.—Do not fail to believe in what *you* call the Vesprie luck, and what I call the dispensation of Providence. I begin to believe in it as much as if I were a Vesprie myself.”

Mrs. Jordan, who had come from London, where

she was now residing, at the news of Vesprie's death, was standing in her bonnet and shawl, for she was that morning returning to town.

When Violet read this letter out to the old servant, she said, "My dear child, this does me a power o' good. I shall leave you alone for a little while much more comfortable now. For mark my words, my dear, if this kind old gentleman ain't the Vesprie luck hisself, he's the very body as is going to bring it about! This old gentleman fell in love with you when you was a child. And no wonder! For there ain't many old gentlemen as wouldn't ha' fallen in love with you. For never was there such a lovable child as you, as I ought to know better than most, being the one as nussed you and suckled you. Now there's nothing so strong in the world as an old gentleman's love for a child such as you was, whether that old gentleman is a father, a grandfather, or an uncle, or just an old gentleman as is a stranger. He worships the very ground on which the little feet walked! And there's nothing he won't do for you. Of course, you know what them words mean about *any other* kind of assistance. They're as much as to say, 'My dear, how I should love to send you some money, only I dussn't, you being such a great lady born.' And o' course you know what them words mean about the Vesprie luck. They mean that he's made a will, and has given you Vesprie Towers, and all the land."

"Why, what nonsense you do talk, Jordan!" said Violet, laughing. "What nonsense you do

talk ! Still, he's a dear, kind man, and—and I love him ! ” And she put the letter to her lips.

Violet wrote a letter to her friend and told him, among other things, that Mrs. Jordan had been to see her, but that as she now kept a lodging-house in London she was obliged to return to town.

The letter written, she went out for a stroll. It was a lovely autumn day—so bright and sunny that it seemed as though a day of June had come wandering back ; indeed the birds seemed to think so, for they that had remained silent during July, and seemed intending to remain silent until another spring-tide, burst into song.

Violet walked herself into such a state of exhilaration that she did not observe that a rain-cloud was passing overhead until she became conscious of that magical indescribable light in the sky opposite to a rainbow. Then a sudden thought came upon her and she ran as fast as her legs would carry her to the wide part of the breakwater which spread out into the mere.

“ Yes,” said she, “ there is the sign—there is the rainbow in the water.”

And she stood and gazed at it. The bow was almost entire, until a slight breeze sprang up and ruffled the stream and it faded away. She stood for a long time looking at the water, and then she turned and looked round among the trees as though she expected to see a face through the opaline gossamer threads that were gleaming from branch to branch. But although she did not see any face under the Vesprie Oak, or among the trees, one was

there. It was that of a young man in sailor's dress. He stood with wide open eyes and parted lips gazing at her ; and so close to her that he could distinctly hear the words, " The luck of Vesprie Towers," that fell from her lips.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE REDWOOD FAMILY

IT so chanced that the young sailor, whose attraction for Violet was so marked during the phenomenon of the rainbow, was the youth already mentioned as destined to play a very important part in the Vesprie drama. He was the son of Jeremiah and Joan Redwood, who lived at Thornton, a town adjoining the village of Vesprie.

Jeremiah Redwood was a sort of celebrity in his way. He was none other indeed than the "Stratford Slasher," a remarkably fine-looking but disreputable fellow.

At an unlucky moment Joan chanced to be thrown across Jerry Redwood. He was, at the time when they first met, one of those dashing young soldiers endowed with all the splendour of a magnificent physique, and in Joan's romantic eyes there was something peculiarly fascinating in a soldier; and although it soon became known that Redwood was a hard drinker, she was seen before long walking out with him. And in spite of the fact that he afterwards became a reprobate, a ne'er-do-weel, a poacher, and an eminent pugilist, she shut her eyes to all his faults and closed her ears to all attacks. The character of this woman was indeed forcibly shown on the day of her marrying the Slasher.

When it first became known that Jerry Redwood was walking out with her, she was warned by all her friends—and notably by the mistress of the national school—that to marry such a man was to destroy her future life.

With passionate sobs she exclaimed over and over again, "It was to be! I strove against it, but it was like striving against a stream! It's a part of my bad luck—but it was to be!"

She was from the first the bread-winner for the entire family.

In a town like Thornton there are hardly any openings for women in Joan's condition of life save that of sheer physical drudgery, but she undertook this with sublime courage. There was nothing to which she would not turn to earn a shilling, whether it was needlework or laundry work, charing or field work. She was the favourite char-woman of Thornton on account of the enormous amount of work that could be got out of her, and in field work she excelled in an equal degree.

Joan Redwood had one great passion which swallowed up all the other passions, and governed every act of her life—love of her children. It is very doubtful whether during all the waking hours of the twenty-four there was one in which her thoughts were not either directly or indirectly about her children. With most mothers, in all countries and in all communities, it is the man-child that they yearn for, and when possessing it, dote upon it to the partial exclusion of other love; and it is for the man-child that the mother especially thanks God. So strong is this in patriarchal and primitive com-



munities like those of some parts of Asia, that the mother has but little affection to expend on the daughter. Among the Bedouins, where the passion for the man-child is perhaps strongest of all, the woman feels that to give birth to a daughter is to suffer a disgrace.

And even in the heartless world of English society, where all other kinds of love seem to have withered away, where there is no romance or pretence of romance, where the young people are older than their parents—*blasé* and worldly—even there, the love of the mother for her son is as vigorous as ever. It is the one thing that keeps London society sweet and bearable to a noble nature—without it society would become odious indeed !

It was our Anglo-Saxon ancestors that brought into civilisation the importance and loveliness of woman ; among English and American people, one might expect that the influence of this Anglo-Saxon idea might display itself more frequently than it does. And when we come to consider the matter we shall not be surprised at the cases where the tie between mother and daughter is very much stronger than the tie between mother and son.

Howsoever strong may be the affection between mother and son, there must needs be one tremendous barrier—the barrier of sex, that barrier which in love-matters of man and woman becomes a rainbow bridge of beauty, leading to a new and unexpected paradise ; but between mother and son and between brother and sister, this barrier is impassable. The two can only touch each other at a few points at all, and those not the essential ones.

In some rare and great and lofty female souls, like that of Joan Redwood, the spiritual impact between mother and son is not strong enough to satisfy the mighty yearning of affection. Something closer is demanded. There must be that sense of companionship which can never exist between them.

This closeness of touch can only be seen between mother and daughter; and if all women were like Joan Redwood, if they were as free from egotism and selfishness and vanity which can poison a mother's blood so entirely as to make her daughter her own rival, the feeling here alluded to would be common and perhaps universal. There would be between every mother and daughter that delicious feeling of intimacy — that divine sensation of living over again that fairy-like life in one's own girl which made Joan's life a blessing to her, even with the wolf snarling at the door. And was Molly worthy of all this affection? Yes, indeed! She was without Joan's strength of character and will and exceeding bravery, and indeed she had lived so much under the protecting wing of "mother" that these characteristic traits of Joan, even if they had originally existed, would have been smothered up. But Molly had all Joan's affectionateness and instinct for self-abnegation; and she was beautiful too. This to the mother was an added tie. Had Molly been plain, crippled even, she would have had from Joan an amount of love such as few daughters win. But it would have been a different kind of love from that which Joan conceived for the little child who loved above all

things, when very young, to lie on the quaintly knitted hearthrug made of innumerable tiny pieces of cloth of every colour with her head on her mother's feet when she was knitting or sewing. Yes, Joan was happy even with the wolf at the door.

Day by day did this extraordinary affection between mother and child grow, until at last, by the time that the young brain of this daughter had developed so that her intelligence had become on a par with that of her mother's, there seemed to be between the two something of that strange kind of telepathy which is supposed to exist in certain cases between twins of the same sex.

The records that come to us of the strange kind of sympathy which existed between the two brothers Lucien and Louis de Franchi, which gave Alexandre Dumas the root idea of the finest of his stories, "*Les Frères Corses*," are too well authenticated to be brushed aside by the materialist, and only the other day the newspapers contained a well-authenticated story of the same kind, in which a well-known lawyer of Chicago, whose twin brother, who was in Manilla, became conscious through sympathy of his brother's death.

But whether these stories are to be accepted as literally true or not, there are certain cases—rare ones no doubt—in which there exists between loving mother and loving daughter a power which can only be called telepathy.

The mysterious chain between them was not exactly that of distinct thoughts, it was that of emotion which, acting upon the organism, produced a sort of semi-conscious sensation. When the

spirits of one were good the spirits of the other rose ; when the spirits were low the spirits of the other were depressed.

On the day upon which this sailor son entered his mother's cottage after his walk across Vesprie Park, his mind full of the beautiful vision of Violet in the light of the rainbow, he spoke to her of his encounter in glowing terms. His mother listened to him in silence.

Now this woman, Joan Redwood, was descended from an extremely ancient peasant family named Thornton, which were very likely living on the soil at Thornton when William the Conqueror came over. Whether the family belonged in those days to the "lower orders" who shall say? For were not the descendants of the very Tyrrell beneath whose arrow William Rufus fell, still living in the New Forest the other day? And was there not till lately, living at Kettering, within a few miles of where the writer of this book was born, an agricultural labourer named Plant, the true and last descendant of the Plantagenets? In a word, may not Joan Redwood's family in Saxon times have been thanes? Indeed, to judge from Joan's appearance, there might well have been a lost strain of the patriciate in her blood compared with which the Vesprie strain itself might be dim and uncertain.

"Violet Vesprie!" said Mrs. Redwood at last in a tone of contempt. "We have ancestors as well as the Vespries. But their lives have been different! Their ancestors caught poachers in

man-traps. Our ancestors were caught. You've heard of the old story of Sir Hugh Vesprie, haven't you, Martin ? ”

“ Yes, mother,” said he.

“ Do you know what became of the daughter he left behind him ? ” said she, “ the daughter who was robbed of her rights by that ancestor of the Vespries—the nephew of Sir Hugh, the crusader ? ”

“ No.”

“ The old story is that she was handed over to a woodman to be done away with, and his name was Thornton, the same as mine before I was married,” said the mother. “ But she was not done away with : she married, and she married the woodman's son. And now what is the difference between you and this girl that your head seems so full of this afternoon ? ”

“ Difference ? Why, mother, what can you mean ? I am only a common sailor, the son of a pugilist ; Miss Vesprie is a high-born lady. What is the difference between me and this beautiful girl ? Why, I am hardly fit in my station of life to black her boots ! ”

## CHAPTER X

### VIOLET'S FRIEND

AND now began the most marvellous life ever lived by any young girl. Violet lived alone in the home of her forefathers and communed with their shades.

Circumstances had combined to bring out with strong emphasis all the strange features of her nature. Outside the little family circle she had never known a friend. And now, after the first acute grief for her father's loss had subsided, Violet did not feel in the least lonely. She had lost all her companions, except her ancestors and the old house where they had lived, and these were all-sufficing to her, for these had always been her chief companions.

Perhaps the reader will say with incredulity : What ! a young girl of seventeen not feel lonely living a solitary life like that ? But such a reader would not understand a character like Violet Vesprie—and such a reader would do well to put down this book and read no more.

To wander down the long passages or through the vast, empty rooms, reading her Shakespear or some other dramatist, to hear the empty spaces answering her recitations, as though they loved them, was quite as delightful to Violet as any social intercourse would have been.

Human nature loses as much as it gains by its



gregariousness. After the mind has been cultivated and enriched as far as it can be by the results of civilisation, solitude is perhaps the cause of the last crown of intellectual development. Solitude brings meditation, and only meditation, properly considered, is true life.

One day she found among the old books an edition of Chaucer, and she began to read it. At first she found the old spelling and the archaic words somewhat difficult; but she loved intellectual difficulty, and she worked at Chaucer with a will, and in a little time she found Chaucer as easy to read as Shakespeare. And now what a new world of delight was open to her! not even Shakespeare had touched as the delightful poet touched her. She discovered that there was a true kinship between her and Chaucer; and no wonder, for if health in poetry is the sweet acceptance and melodious utterance of the beauty of the world as it is, Chaucer is the most healthy poet that has appeared in any literature. His delight is to represent. Of all poets he is the most purely artistic; so that he can paint for his own enjoyment and ours a beautiful picture, he cares not from what source he draws his materials.

The riches and the wonderfulness of life—these are his theme—a theme which is as fresh and delightful now as it was in his time, and as fresh and delightful as it was when all those countless stories of romantic adventure, upon which his poetry and all the imaginative literature of the West are built, were lisped in the Aryan cradle.

Of the simply terrene poets Chaucer is the king.

Weeks passed, and Mrs. Jordan did not come from London to see her, as she had expected. She was too occupied with her lodgers. But Violet was not at all depressed; on the contrary, her feeling was a kind of exhilaration, so entirely had she enjoyed living alone. She took the precaution to keep as far as she could the knowledge of her lonely existence from the Thornton people; and when anyone such as the tradesmen called to ask after Mrs. Jordan she answered that she was quite well.

Perhaps the best way to make the reader understand the peculiar nature of this remarkable girl will be to give in full a letter she wrote to Mr. Brandon in answer to one she got from him in which he expressed his concern at the idea of her living alone, and asked her to tell him the way in which her days were passed.

“My dear, kind friend,” she wrote to him. “Your letter has touched me so deeply that I find it very difficult to write to you. You have been so kind that I am longing to see you. But you must not suppose that I am in the least unhappy because I am living in the dear old place alone. On the contrary, my days are so full that I am startled by the swiftness with which they pass. In the morning I get up and light the fire for my breakfast; and if it is winter I warm the water for my bath. Then there is the delight of a strong girl like me with an appetite like mine—the appetite of a browsing deer at dawn—in taking my breakfast alone. After breakfast I often sit with my elbows on the table looking out of the window, lost in the joy of living in such a beautiful world. Every shrub in the

foreground, every tree in the middle distance or beyond the mere, touching the horizon, is a companion I love. I seem to know every kind of bird that twitters or warbles on the lawn, and I seem to enjoy it far more being alone than if I had been with companions.

“ I start as though awakened from a dream, and attend to the business of the day, business which would have been prosaic enough had I not been alone. But the solitude seems to give poetry to it : the very dusting of the room with no sound to disturb me, except the wind in the trees, and the music of the birds, seems a mysterious rite in honour of the mysterious goddess Silence.

“ Then there is the mounting the vast old staircase and entering the room where I have slept with the morning sun shining on the bed, for I chose a room with an eastern aspect, and begin to toss my bed about and feel just like a chambermaid ; and it is a nice feeling to be so strong and able to do things for yourself ; and I often make it look so smooth and delicious that I feel half inclined to throw myself on it again to enjoy its springiness. Then there is the running down stairs to answer the summons of the butcher, or baker boy, or milk boy. Then there is the preparing of my luncheon and the cooking of it. You've no idea what a delightful occupation cooking is, except that it sometimes makes you so uncomfortably warm. Then there is my morning prowling round the garden, and the orchard, to look after the vegetables, and to enjoy the sight of the apple blossoms, if it is spring, or the beauty of the fruit, if it is autumn. Is there any-

thing in the world so sweet as the scent of a Ribstone pippin ? or the beauty of the rime frost if it is winter ?

“ And you must know that this garden, without any gardener but myself, stands the severity of the winter better than it would do if I could afford a gardener ; for while *he*, during the autumn, would be thinking about neatness, *I* am thinking about the coming winter ; and instead of clearing away the leaves I brush them away into great heaps, and then, as winter approaches, I brush them over the beds like counterpanes ; and there the roots lie, laughing at the frost and waiting for the spring !

“ Then there comes the eating of the luncheon, most enjoyable because I am alone. In the afternoon there is the row on the mere, and then the preparation of the dinner, and the eating of that. You can see how the greedy girl keeps talking about eating !

“ And shall I tell you which are my two favourite plays ? They are ‘ As You Like It ’ and ‘ Midsummer Night’s Dream.’ These I know by heart, and I believe I could recite them from beginning to end. But for many weeks I have been deep in Chaucer, whose poems have opened a new world to me.

“ And now I am going to tell you something that I feel you will laugh at. Sometimes, to my amazement, after reciting some passage from one of these plays, I seem to hear a faint clapping of hands along the long picture gallery outside. Once when I seemed to hear this sound I sprang to the door and

opened it, when I thought I heard the noise of feet running down the gallery and thought I saw the shadow of a figure pass before the moonlit windows.

“ But of course this all came from the vanity the would-be actress.

“ Afterwards, when the night wears on, my companions of the drama are fully replaced by companions still more beloved, my ancestors in the panels in the pictures fixed in the walls. I often take up my candle and walk along the gallery and talk to each one to whom I give a story of my own imagining. Owing to the teaching of my dear mother, I do not know what superstitious fears are, although I have read about them in books. I feel that my ancestors' spirits are my protectors. I really think that if I felt a hand upon my shoulder, and on turning round saw the old crusader gazing at me, I should not be the least afraid, I should smile in his face; now and again, when a sound does make my heart beat more loudly, it is a sound which I associate with flesh and blood. It is a sound which might come from an invader of the burglar kind. This is why I always take to my bedroom at night the double-barrelled gun charged with duck-shot, with which I used to be such an adept in the shooting days with my father.

“ Sometimes some well-meaning person, generally a woman from Thornton, will come up across the pleasaunce and rap at the door, impelled thereto by a good-natured impulse towards a young girl leading, as they think, such a dreary life, even with Mrs. Jordan to keep her company, as they suppose

to be the case; but I do not court such invasions, and lately they have almost entirely ceased.

“But how I am running on! Pray don’t take the trouble to read all this letter, but read the little bits that seem interesting, and forgive the garrulity of your grateful friend, VIOLET VESPRIE.”

It will now be seen how entirely the luck of the Vespries that haunted the Towers made Violet feel under absolute protection, and caused her to have no fear in living alone.

The postman’s visits were rare indeed, and when they did take place they agitated Violet beyond measure. Except the letter from Mr. Brandon, they were always addressed to her dead father, of whose death the correspondent did not know.

To Violet’s mind the postman was always associated with that dreadful news about Lawrence’s death.

One morning the postman brought a letter from Mr. Brandon, with the London post-mark on it, saying that he was in England, and looked forward to the pleasure of calling upon Violet on the following day.

This was delightful news for Violet, for she had frequently called to mind the benevolent ogre, and felt sure that he had been befriending her for years by allowing her to remain in the Towers.

Shortly after breakfast on the following morning there was a ring at the bell, and she ran through the passages and opened the door, and there was the ogre standing looking at her, but without speaking a word. He was dazzled and overawed at the splendour of the girl’s beauty.



She shook him warmly by the hand and led him into the room where she had been breakfasting. "How—how very kind of you, Mr. Brandon, to come and see me! Ever since receiving your letter yesterday I have had but one thought—you."

Mr. Brandon sat down and looked at her, still unable to speak. When he could converse with her he told her he had reached Thornton overnight and was staying at the "George" Hotel.

"When I got your letter," said Brandon, "I could not rest until I had come to see you. The good spirits in which your letter was written could not blind me to the fact that you were leading a solitary life such as no young lady ought to lead, and I came to offer you whatever services are in my power to render you."

"You are a dear, kind friend," said Violet; "but really I feel, in a general way, far from lonely."

"Most extraordinary," said Brandon; "but do you never suffer from depression?"

"Sometimes," said Violet; "reminiscences of my bereavements do become too strong for me, and then I feel very, very sad. But it passes."

"But it is inconceivable, Miss Vesprie, that you should have been able to live alone like this. Were you not afraid? Did nothing at all occur to try your nerves?"

"Very rarely," said Violet; "and yet strange things have occurred."

"Strange things? You did not tell me of them in your letter."

"Well, I could not without offering you some

explanation ; and I really had none to offer, except one which I thought you would not believe in."

"Pray tell me," said Brandon.

"Well, it occurred for the first time on the second anniversary of my brother Lawrence's death. I chanced to go into his room to recall the happy hours that I had spent with him in childhood. To my amazement I found spread open upon the table my brother Lawrence's copy of the famous plan of our great-great-grandfather's for restoring Vesprie Towers. When I had last seen it it was rolled up, and stood in a corner of the room. I felt far too well assured of the accuracy of my own memory to doubt this. I stood rooted to the spot, gazing as Robinson Crusoe gazed at the footmarks on the sand ! "

"Certainly a most wonderful thing ! And very startling. What could it mean ? "

And Brandon shuddered visibly, for—sharing the Moravian doctrine of the inborn total depravity of human nature—all sorts of dreadful ideas of men getting into the place came upon him.

"What could it mean indeed ? " said Violet. "That is what I asked myself. I could find no other explanation than this—that Lawrie's spirit had returned and joined the spirits of our own ancestors in the Towers."

"Well," said Brandon, "that is at least a more Christian idea than that of the water-fairies of which your mind was so full as a child ! But it is a very strange and puzzling affair."

"You smile rather doubtingly," said Violet.

"No, indeed ! I was really thinking," said Bran-

don, "of the cruel way in which I have left you to live alone in this old place! But you must leave it. It is not fit for you to live alone like this."

"Leave Vesprie Towers! Not until I am turned out by *you*, Mr. Brandon."

"And that you will never be! But pray go on with this story of yours."

"I went to my bedroom and threw myself upon the bed and sobbed bitterly, moaning 'Lawrie dead—Lawrie dead!' Then I started up suddenly, for it seemed to me that the words were repeated in the passage in a voice that sobbed like my own, 'Lawrie dead—Lawrie dead!' But on going to the door and looking down the corridor I saw nothing."

"Well, Miss Vesprie, if you will not leave the Towers we must find some nice female companion for you, or even several. We will initiate in the old building what we Moravians call a 'choir,' and you shall be a leader of it; anyhow you must not and shall not live alone surrounded by these creations of your fancy; for surely they are nothing else, Miss Vesprie! But pray go on with this strange story."

"But they were *not* creations of my fancy, Mr. Brandon! On the following morning," said Violet, "when I went down to the kitchen I was amazed to find a bright fire burning and the kettle boiling. The strange sight startled me even more than the plan on the table had done. Had not somebody got into the house, I thought, and if the house had been entered—for what purpose? Then for the first time I did feel frightened."

"I should think so indeed! Why you must have

nerves of iron," said Brandon. "It—it makes me shudder to think of your living here subject to a thousand perils."

"But my courage soon returned," said Violet, "and I went upstairs and fetched my gun, and then explored every inch of the building. Not a soul was to be seen. I returned to the kitchen, and as my fears had not dulled my appetite I prepared my breakfast. You may well imagine that the strange occurrence of the morning was on my mind during the day, and at night I felt my nerves to be a little less strong than usual. I did not take my usual ramble through the gallery, and when I went upstairs I certainly looked over my shoulder more than once. And when I did get into bed I sprang into it, and kept the candle burning for some time afterwards."

"I am quite sure *I* would not have dared to go to bed at all," said Brandon, laughing.

"I soon fell asleep," said Violet. "But after a while I was awakened by a noise in the passage outside the door. Then I heard a soft rap on the door; I struck a light and cried out, 'Who's there—what do you want?' My cry was answered by words that I could only partly follow, but I made out the words, 'Lawrence—Lawrence!' and then the words, 'Don't be afraid.' My fears vanished in a moment and I cried out, 'Yes, dear Lawrie, I know—I know! You have come back to watch over me. It was you that laid the plan on the table; it was you that lit the fire!' And then I fell asleep."

"What a wonderful young lady you are," said Brandon, looking at her with a sort of adoration in

his eyes. "You really amaze me. But go on—pray tell me all. I am deeply interested."

"On going downstairs next morning," said Violet, "I found the fire burning as before, and the kettle boiling. During the day I found other things that Lawrence used to do, done for me. I found my boots cleaned, but not put in the place where I used to find them when Lawrence was alive. The potatoes, cabbages and other vegetables that would be wanted for the day, I found in the pantry."

"What a very practical spirit," murmured Brandon to himself. "But I don't like it—I'm alarmed. And now what explanation of these wonders have you found for yourself?" he said to Violet; "is it a supernatural one, or a human one?"

"Well," said Violet, "you must not press me too closely on that point; but the only human explanation that ever occurred to me was that some friend of the good soul who used to live with me, I mean Mrs. Jordan, until she had to go to London, sympathised with my lonely condition and kept furtive watch over me."

"And yet that explanation does not quite satisfy me."

Violet then began to tell him many other incidents in her extraordinary life, led on to do so by Brandon's questions. At every pause in the talk the worthy man tried to summon up courage to tell her what was the purport of his visit, and failed. How could he say to this radiant creature, and representative of all that was patrician, that he wished her to accept him as an adopted father? And without this bold proposition how could he

offer her assistance of a pecuniary kind ? In order to gain time he asked her to take him over the building, and show him all the pictures again. He thought by doing this they would be brought into closer touch with each other, and he might perhaps then summon courage to do what he wanted to do.

Violet sprang up, delighted to be show-woman again. And away they went along the corridor and from room to room. Every now and then an opportunity would seem to present itself to him. But in spite of all his efforts he could never seize it. No, he must get away to his room at the "George" and think matters over.

Violet was leading him towards the room where the famous Robin Hood pictures were, but Brandon wished to be alone to consider his course of action, and told her it was time for him to leave and return to his hotel at Thornton. He felt too much agitated indeed to prolong the interview further. So he rose, bade her "Good-day," and asked her if he might call upon her next morning, and see the Robin Hood panels.

"My dear—dear friend ! I shall be all impatience until I see you again," said Violet, as she grasped his hand warmly in her own.



## CHAPTER XI

### THE SLASHER'S SON

WHEN Mr. Brandon got to the "George" Hotel his mind was so full of the incidents of the morning that he did but scant justice to the capital luncheon which the waiter set before him. And when the lunch was over, and all the afternoon and during his solitary dinner, and all the evening, his mind was occupied with Violet Vesprie.

There had sprung up within his breast a passion of love such as is difficult to understand and difficult to define.

Philoprogenitiveness was its basis; and yet no father could have loved his daughter in exactly the same way as Brandon loved Violet. In a certain sense it was parental love, but it was a sublimation of this love. It was something as if a mortal parent had found himself the father of a goddess, and stood abashed at the discovery.

"I shall go to her at once," said he. "Yes, I will go and ask her to let me take the place of her father. I will tell her all my antecedents—I will let her see what a presumptuous thing it is for me to ask her to bless a man in my position in the way that she can bless me, and I will endow her with every farthing that is mine. As to such few relatives as I have,

what are they to me ? A few legacies of a thousand each will fully satisfy them. I will fulfil her dream ! I will restore Vesprie Towers exactly as it was before it was despoiled. The very thought of it makes me a young man again. I have now an object in life."

But no sooner had he come to this determination than he stood appalled at the presumption of the idea of his asking her to accept him as an adopted father. For the worthy man's prosperity had never enabled him to accept himself as anything more than the shopkeeper of Eastcheap.

He had married a wife of consumptive tendencies who had brought him two consumptive daughters. And when he learnt from medical authority that they must all be banished from England, and live in Madeira, he had sold his business and migrated to Funchal with them. All his solicitude for them, however, had been of no avail. In three years he was left a widower and childless.

It was shortly after these bereavements that he had come to England on business connected with his mortgages ; and it was then that he saw Violet as a child. This indeed is one of the explanations of the extraordinary way in which Violet had attracted him. When he, on that occasion, returned to London and saw his solicitors, Messrs. Walton and Walton, and made inquiries about the Vesprie family, his solicitors had dwelt with great eloquence upon the pride and almost grotesque ancestor worship of the penniless Vespries.

A less modest man than Mr. Brandon might have succeeded in devising some plan for fulfilling his

new-born desire to benefit the family of the sweet child who had so fascinated him. But like so few of the *nouveaux riches*, he felt that the unpardonable sin was presumption. He came to the conclusion that the only way in which he could be of substantial use to the family would be by allowing them to remain at the Towers, and leaving them to pay rent—or not to pay it—according to their ability. If the Vespries had not been the great family he knew them to be, and if he himself had been less conscious of his own humble origin, he would have made some effort to assist them in a more open and effective way ; but he had shrunk from it. Nothing could make him listen to his solicitors' urgent remonstrances as to the loss of income caused by the neglect of the Vesprie property.

And so time went on ; and now and again an eligible offer would be made for Vesprie Towers and the grounds, and the deer park, or for Vesprie Towers and the grounds alone ; but to the vexation and astonishment of the solicitors, he refused every offer. The lovely child who acted as cicerone to him when he went over the Towers and grounds lived in his memory like a beautiful picture ; and often and often, when he sat alone in his house at Funchal, mourning the loss of his wife and children, he would feel the grasp of the child's fingers that pulled him along towards the mere to see the mirrored rainbow.

When he got the news of Vesprie's death he lacked the courage to do what he longed to do—to make an offer to this young lady of pecuniary

assistance. All that he had dared to do he had done in hinting that he would act as her friend if she ever needed one.

But now, while he sat lingering over his breakfast, no sooner had he made up his mind that he would in the morning tell Violet what he wanted to tell her than another set of thoughts came up to disturb him.

One of the chief points in the Moravian creed was the heinousness of pride — one of the cardinal sins; and it was impossible to converse with Violet Vesprie without being struck by her indomitable pride, a pride which no poverty and no disaster seemed to quell. Would it be right for him to give this unregenerate one the wealth that had been accumulated by the humble toil of his father-in-law, the Cheapside tradesman, and himself?

He knew that it had been the fervent wish of his dead wife that his wealth—the nucleus of which had come through her—should, in the event of his being left childless, go to the great missionary cause of the Moravian Church. He knew, moreover, that all the Moravians of England, Germany and America, fully believed—upon his own word—that this would be the destination of his property. Those who know nothing of the Moravians would find it difficult to realise how strong is the zeal in that estimable community. When, in 1732, their first mission was planted in the West Indies, the noble enthusiasts who went there expressed their resolve to become slaves themselves, if it were necessary, in order to carry out their grand purpose. It was

they who turned Greenland from a heathen country. For hours Brandon thought over these things. He pictured to himself Lionel Dover, and David Nitschmann, going out to St. Thomas, determined to wear the gyves of slavery themselves rather than leave the slaves without the light of the gospel. He contrasted their self-abnegation with his own self-indulgence, and his soul was so disturbed that, even now and then as he lay in his bed, he would utter a moan. Sleep came at last ; and when he awoke his first thought was, not of Lionel Dover and David Nitschmann, but of Violet Vesprie.

Spread upon the breakfast table was a newspaper damp from the press, and smelling of printer's ink. It was the *Thornton Gazette*, published that morning. He turned it over listlessly, for he knew how belated is news in papers of that kind. Soon his eye was arrested by a poem signed " Martin Redwood," and he began to read it. The poem was called the " Rose of Nature." It declared that in this universe where even Nature, so beautiful and so beloved, is a mere unconscious, unloving mother, —woman is the only poem. She is the last expression of Nature's dream of beauty, and when civilisation is understood she will take the place that she took in old Egypt as the lady and queen of man. For, owing to what are called the very weaknesses of woman, she is in closer touch with moral beauty, and in closer touch with the spiritual world, than man.

" Ah," said Brandon, " it seems as though Providence had ordained that this poem should be set before me to-day ! By fostering woman we

benefit the entire human race, and prepare for the millennium."

He rose and left his breakfast and went out and strolled through the Vesprie meadows that bordered the deer park. It was much too early for him to call on Violet, and he wandered about trying to screw up his courage to open the project to her of which his mind was so full. In the corner of a turnip field he came suddenly upon an old shepherd who bade him "Good morning," but with an expression of great curiosity on his face.

Brandon got talking with him, and was soon earnestly listening to what the old shepherd had to say about Vesprie Towers and the extraordinary young lady who lived in the haunted mansion.

"But I know summut about *she* as nobody else don't know nothink about," said the man.

"Why, what do you mean?" said Brandon.

"There's some rum goin's on in the Towers, *I* can tell you—some rum goin's on! What I've see'd I've see'd. T-ain't a-goin' to pass my lips, for Mrs. Vesprie was a good kind o' woman, an' I ain't a-goin' to say nothink about her darter's goin's on. But *I* know what I know!"

Brandon was determined in some way or another to get from the old man what he had to say; and had soon opened the old man's lips by the sight of half a sovereign.

"Well," said he, "there's a young chap as lives in Thornton as used to be very friendly like with Muster Lawrie Vesprie, an' a very clever chap he is, too! He writes things in the *Thornton Gazette*, an' I think it's right down wonderful for a chap as



is the son o' the Stratford Slasher! Well, one morning, very early, when I got up to get mushrooms in the park, summut made me go an' give a look at the old Towers where the young gal lives all alone. An' what do you think I sees? I sees that young chap—Martin Redwood by name——”

“Martin Redwood?”

“Aye, Martin Redwood—I sees him a-slippin' out o' one o' the kitchen winders. An' then I sees his shadow follow along the wall and out o' sight!—ah, that gives you a sturt, sir?”

For a moment Brandon stood aghast; for, being a Moravian, he believed implicitly in the depravity in human nature, especially in sexual relations. But then the glorious vision of Violet came into his eyes, and he was half-ashamed of the creed in which he had been born. And then another thought came to him, as he recalled Violet's story of the mysterious person that tended her unseen.

“I must know this young man who is so devoted to her,” he said to himself. “But it is wrong—very wrong! I must surround her by a choir of young Moravian women.”

“It guv me a turn too, sir, you may think! You might ha' knocked me down with a feather when I seed that sight!” continued the man; “an' I told my missus, an' she sez, ‘Jabez,’ sez she, ‘we'll both on us get up to-morrow morning afore sunrise an' we'll watch.’ An' I sez, ‘No! No woman shall watch along o' me! I ain't no sneak, an' if you go an' tell anybody I shall jist drop you one!’ An' I went next morning by mysel', an' lo an' behold, there was jist the same game a-goin' on! An' I sez,

‘Fancy a Vesprie comin’ to that—fancy a Vesprie a-takin’ up with the Stratford Slasher’s son!’”

“And you never told anybody of this?” said Brandon.

“No, only you.”

“Well, look here,” said Brandon, “I’ll give you another half-sovereign if you’ll promise me never to tell anybody, and keep your wife from telling anybody.”

But in truth, unknown to the shepherd, another person had been a witness to all that he had been telling Brandon. This person was Martin’s mother. During all the time Joan Redwood had kept a watchful eye on her son. Yes, she had found out all about his infatuation—his worship of Violet—not from any words that had fallen from Martin’s lips, but from the expression on his face and from his daily course of life. With the rapid power of induction, which her intense affection for her son had given her, she came to the conclusion that he had fallen hopelessly in love with this daughter of the Vespries. But she carefully kept from him the fact that she knew his secret. She was far too sagacious to dream for a moment that her opposition to this attachment would have any effect upon it, save indeed fanning the flame. All *she* could do was to lavish her own affection upon him, and at the same time to keep before his eyes the story of the wrongs that her own family had suffered from the Vespries in the days of long ago.

One night, when she lay awake, thinking over this complication, she heard the door of her son’s

room open, and then she heard his footsteps as he crept down the stairs.

She at once connected this incident with Violet Vesprie, who, she knew, was living alone. She leapt out of bed and dressed herself hastily, and when she heard him unlock and unbolt the cottage door, and go out, she felt sure he was going to the Towers, and she followed him. It was a light night, and she was able to keep him in view at a considerable distance. She saw him steal across the kitchen garden and gently lift the sash of the kitchen window and enter the place. Then she returned to the cottage, and leaving the door as her son had left it, crept into bed.

From the very first she had a glimmering sense of the meaning of her son's extraordinary action.

“ He knows she is alone, and he is turning himself into a watch-dog to guard over her ! ”

## CHAPTER XII

### A MORNING WITH THE MORTGAGEE

WHEN Brandon left the old shepherd he walked in deep meditation towards the Towers. When he reached the pleasaunce he found Violet moving about and attending to some flowers. She looked grander than ever, Brandon thought, though she was only dressed in a plain morning dress, with a hat of the Gainsborough kind. Her delight at seeing him was so genuine that his courage rose, and he felt sure that he would be able to approach the subject next to his heart.

"I promised you," said she, "to show you the famous Robin Hood pictures, and to tell you the story, and I am all impatience to begin my task."

And the two went in at the front door. As they passed through the corridor Brandon stopped before a picture of a gentleman with a hawk on his wrist.

"I need not ask whether the Vespries in the hawking times were famous for their falconry. This is made clear enough by the panel pictures."

"Yes," said Violet; "an unusual number of the Vespries have been painted as you see, with hawks on their wrists, and some of their hawks were of those superior varieties of the falconry which only certain families were allowed to possess."

She said this with entire unconsciousness of what it implied ; but it cowed poor Mr. Brandon more than if she had dwelt upon the wide gulf fixed between her family and his own.

He asked her about one picture of a very striking nature. This was a panel portrait, she told him, of a Vesprie who was intimate with James the First.

They now passed into the large room, where Violet, as a child, had previously shown him the panel pictures relating to the outlaws. This had evidently been a very important room. On the walls there were pictures in various stages of preservation. The marks of damp upon some of them showed that the rain through the damaged windows—now paned with modern panes of glass—had for some time beaten.

One of the outlaw pictures, which Violet had especially brought him to see, was a quaint picture divided into two parts, one part representing a hawking scene. It was filled with ladies and gentlemen dressed in antique costumes, with falcons on the wrists, and with all the equipments for an important hawking party. They were divided into three groups. In the centre of one was a richly dressed young lady surrounded by a few friends and retainers. Among these was a tall man-at-arms who seemed to be very much on the alert. In the centre of another group, surrounded also by a few friends and retainers, was a gentleman who was looking somewhat askant across a field at a third and far larger group, the centre figure of which wore a sinister expression on his face and was whispering to a man riding by his side. It showed

pretty clearly that a conspiracy was afoot in the larger group to molest the lady, and that those in the smaller group were unconscious of it, except the tall man-at-arms.

The second part of the panel was divided off from the first by an enormous spreading tree, and behind this tree were grouped a large number of men and women, dressed in green, bearing bows. These were watching, through an opening between the leaves, the hawkers, and were evidently waiting in readiness to attack the larger party. The pictures, though sadly defective in perspective, told their story admirably.

"What is the story?" said Brandon.

Violet went up to the picture and said, "They are going to kidnap that lady, and the famous outlaws are going to rescue her. That lady," continued Violet, "is a famous member of the Vesprie family." And then, pointing to the gentleman in the smaller group, "That is one of her lovers—lover number one." Then pointing to the gentleman in the larger group, "That is one of her lovers—lover number two; and he has invited the lady to the hawking party in order to kidnap her, and take her to his castle!"

Then turning to the other part of the picture she said, "There is Little John, and there is Friar Tuck, and there are all the famous outlaws, some of them gypsies, ready to pull their arrows on the traitor lover as soon as he makes a move!"

They then passed on to the other pictures, and all the while Brandon's mind was only partly occupied by observing them, for he was seeking an



opportunity to broach the subject of which he was so full. It occurred to him now that the easiest way to do this would be to ask Violet to take him for a walk across the deer park to the mere, as she did as a child. By recalling the incidents from that previous walk, he thought he might broach the subject. Violet was delighted at the prospect of doing this, and they sallied out together, walking over the pleasaunce, and through the deer park.

When they reached a famous tree called the "Imp Tree," Violet, observing that her companion did not walk with a very elastic step, sat down upon the bole of the tree, and invited him to sit down by her side. And then she chatted on so sweetly and so musically that the simple-minded Moravian was fairly bewitched. Never before had he so yielded to the charms of woman. After a while they rose and walked towards the backwater where Violet's boat lay moored.

"This is your boat, I suppose?" said Brandon.

"Yes," said Violet, looking at it with loving eyes as though it were a conscious thing. "Would you let me row you in it a few minutes? I should so love to row you up the backwater to the river."

Brandon consented, and they both stepped into the boat, and Violet skilfully, by a stroke or two of the sculls, began to pull it up the backwater towards the river.

Brandon sat in a pleasant kind of dream as the boat sped smoothly along. The sensation was as delightful as it was new, to see himself borne along by the skill and strength of this lovely young creature. And if at that moment they had left the

boat, and he had left the Towers, and had returned to London, it is a certainty that Vesprie Towers and all its belongings would have gone—not to the Moravian missionary cause, but to Violet Vesprie.

When they reached the end of the backwater, and the boat swept round the corner behind the osier ait, Violet stopped and asked Brandon to listen to the singing of the birds.

## CHAPTER XIII

### AN UNEXPECTED REVELATION

AT the very moment when Brandon and Violet paused to listen to the birds, Martin Redwood chanced to be seated in the osier ait at his mother's side, concealed from Violet by a thick willow tree. It was not until it was too late for them to move away that the sound of the sculls and then of the two voices fell upon their ears. The effect upon Martin, as his mother was not slow to observe, was startling; Violet's voice he had often heard, when she was reciting her dramatic scenes. But the only time he had ever heard it in colloquy with himself was on that night when it came through the door panel in response to his own words about Lawrie. By stooping forward he could see the two occupants of the skiff through the foliage. There was Violet, lovelier than ever, in that becoming hat, and blue-striped morning dress which showed every line of her matchless figure; there she was, sitting in her boat, an elderly gentleman at the stern, looking with deep benevolence and affection at the beautiful creature. Martin Redwood knew him, from the gossip at the "George" Hotel that morning, to be the mortgagee of Vesprie Towers.

Every word they spoke fell upon the young man's ear with merciless distinctness; for Violet's voice

chained him as if by magic to the spot. It is doubtful whether he would have had the strength to move away under the spell of that music. So far from feeling any curiosity or desire to know what the two were talking about, he would fain have listened to the speech merely, without being able to follow the words. But what he heard concerned him so deeply that it changed the current of his life and warped his very nature.

More for the purpose of finding some subject for conversation than anything else, Brandon said, "Those pictures in which Robin Hood appears are very interesting. Did you say that the lady who figures in the pictures was an ancestress of yours?"

"Yes," said Violet, "she was one of the Nottinghamshire family, and she brought, I believe, a large Nottinghamshire estate to the Vespries. But that—like the rest—is gone. There is a strange story in connection with her."

"What is that?"

"She was the object, it is said, of an extraordinary passion on the part of one of her own men-at-arms, who afterwards became an outlaw. In order to understand fully the pictures it is necessary to understand something of that story. It is called 'Robin Hood's Rescue.' Shall I tell it to you?"

"It would be very kind of you to do so," said Brandon.

"Well," said Violet, "it seems that the hand of the Nottinghamshire heiress was sought by two rivals, Nottinghamshire nobles—an honest lover named Wayland and a villain named Giles de Ray.

Lord Giles formed a villainous plan to kidnap the lady at a hawking party, and carry her off to his castle, which adjoined Lord Wayland's domain. The plot was discovered during the hawking by the enamoured man-at-arms—Ralph. And Ralph whispered to the lady that he wanted particularly to speak to her on a very important matter ; and he proposed that he should slip away to a certain glade that she knew well, and await her there.

“The lady having become aware of the presumption of the man-at-arms, at first refused to listen to the proposition, but eventually, being struck by the expression of earnestness on the man's face, she reluctantly yielded and went to the place indicated, where Ralph was already awaiting her, and where they were out of sight of the hawking party. Ralph told her of Giles de Ray's plot against her, and urged her at once to ride off accompanied by himself as her protector to her own castle. She, it seems, cherished a sort of preference for De Ray, although the other suitor, Wayland, was a good and worthy gentleman. Besides, she had suspicions of the good faith of Ralph. She refused to believe his story, and grew very angry that the charge had been made. She raised her riding whip and said if he repeated the story she would strike him. Ralph did repeat it, and she struck him violently across the face. At the same moment the traitor knight, De Ray, entered the glade with his followers and captured both the lady and Ralph. They tied Ralph to a tree, and things would have fared very ill with them, but Robin Hood and his merry men rushed upon the scene, overpowered De Ray

and his retainers, and carried the lady in triumph to her castle."

"A very interesting story," said Brandon. "But the person that interests me more is the faithful man-at-arms, Ralph, who loved the lady. I wonder what became of him? Did he return to the lady's service after such an outrage?"

"Outrage!" said Violet. "That is surely too strong a word, considering the man's offence. You forget the presumption of a man of that class falling in love with a lady of *her* class. However, the story goes that he angrily resented the whipping and joined the outlaws."

"And what is said to have been the end of him, poor fellow?" said Brandon.

"Well, I think he was executed at Nottingham for some depredation he had committed in his adventures with Robin Hood."

During this story, Mrs. Redwood watched her son's face intently, and noticed that he frequently changed colour.

And what was its effect upon Brandon? He sat in grave silence looking straight before him. Never before had he fully realised the power of the idea of caste over the best natures. This exquisite girl whom he adored had spoken of the most sacred emotion in the human breast with disdain and contempt. And why? Because a man had had the presumption to fall in love with a woman of superior rank to his own! The poor elder's heart sank within him. How could he dare to make the attempt to bridge over the gulf between himself and her?



Brandon, apparently in order to turn the conversation into some more interesting channel, said to Violet, "You call that strange tree that you showed me in the park the old Imp Tree?"

"Yes," said Violet; "Lawrence took the deepest interest in it."

The name of her brother Lawrence recalled to Brandon's mind what the old shepherd told him about Lawrence Vesprie and his friend Martin Redwood, and he said, "In coming to you this morning I got into talk with an old shepherd who mentioned to me this brother of yours whom you have lost, and also mentioned an intimate friend of his."

"An intimate friend?" said Violet meditatively. "Lawrie had no intimate friend, except myself." Then she continued with a start, "Ah! I remember now. There was a Thornton lad with whom he became acquainted. But one could scarcely call him Lawrie's intimate friend!"

"Then you did not know this young acquaintance of your brother's?"

"No, I never saw him."

"Never saw him?"

"Never, as far as I can recollect," said Violet. "Lawrie often wanted to introduce the young man to me, but of course I refused!"

"Then there was something against his character, I suppose?" said Brandon.

"Nothing that I ever heard of," said Violet. But of course it was impossible for me to know him."

"I don't think I quite understand you," said Brandon.

"What I mean, Mr. Brandon, is that I could not possibly have any Thornton lad introduced to me. But, besides this, he was one of the lowest of the low—a mere gutter-bird, to use the strong expression of my dear old nurse, who, to be sure, has a great prejudice against the young man's family."

"Is every person of low origin a gutter-bird?" said Brandon. "These are strange views, if you will allow me to say it, for a Christian young lady to have of English people of whatever class."

"He is the son of a notorious pugilist," said Violet; "the greatest blackguard, they say, that ever lived in Thornton."

Mrs. Redwood's fingers suddenly tightened on her son's arm until he nearly cried out with the pain.

"But I was not inquiring about the father," said Brandon; "but about the young man—your brother's friend, or acquaintance."

"My father considered my views to be peculiarly broad for—for——"

"For a Vesprrie," said Brandon.

"Well, I suppose I was going to say that," said Violet; "but even *I* must draw the line somewhere. This man's father is not only a pugilist; he belongs—so they say—to the lowest of the low. I used often to remind Lawrie of this. But he was quite infatuated about the young man. He used to say 'The young fellow can't help having been born in the gutter, Vi! And besides, to me, cottagers and tradesmen are pretty well of the same class. What's the difference? If it comes to that, I'd rather associate with a cottager than a tradesman.'"

“ And do you take these views ? ” said Brandon.

“ Certainly I do ! I like cottagers—in their place,” said Violet.

Brandon stared straight before him, and he saw pictures of Moravian stations in Greenland, in Lapland, and in the tropics.

“ My brother stood up strongly for this friend, and he used to say ‘ Martin Redwood is a very good fellow, Vi ! He is well educated, better than we are, I can tell you. And he can write poetry ; some verses once fell out of his pocket. I saw them. And his manners are good. And after all, you know, Vi, he’s of the same flesh and blood as *we* are.’ ”

“ And what did you say in answer to this view of your brother’s ? You look as though you didn’t agree with him.”

“ Well,” said Violet, “ there is such a thing as race. Look at the difference there is between one horse and another.”

“ Certainly there is,” said Brandon, in a far-away tone.

“ Why,” said Violet, “ I can tell how much blood there is in a horse by a glance at his quarters and shoulders. And so could Lawrie. He would have made his fortune as a horse-dealer.”

“ But then, after all,” said Brandon, “ you don’t look upon men and women exactly in that way, do you ? ”

Violet smiled and said, “ It was through Lawrie’s admiration of prize-fighting that he thought so much of his friend. And I wouldn’t have objected to meeting him,” Violet continued, “ if he kept his

proper place. I have, as I've told you, a real liking for the cottager, and as a child used to love to get out and join their games until father forbade it. But I couldn't meet this young man as Lawrie's friend and mine ! A Vesprie can only make friends with gentlemen."

"And what did your brother say in answer to this ?" said Brandon, in a tone which to a less single-minded girl would have betrayed his feelings.

"Well, Lawrie said, 'You don't suppose I would have associated with a Thornton boy if he hadn't been a son of the Stratford Slasher ? When I think of that, it makes me forget he's not a gentleman !' But," said she abruptly, "let's talk about something else." She then turned the boat round and rowed up the backwater.

Violet sat perfectly motionless and silent in the boat, and the worthy Moravian sat and watched the changes on her face.

Brandon, after a while, in order to break the awkward silence, reminded her of what she told him as a child about her dream in the oaken chair.

"Do you remember, Miss Vesprie, that during that delightful day when you acted as cicerone over the Towers, you told me about a remarkable dream that was exercising your mind very much ?"

"Perfectly," said Violet, "but the still more remarkable thing is this : that every now and then the dream recurs, but in each case the dream-figure seems to grow with my growth and to age with my age."

"Most remarkable," said Brandon. "Will you

tell me again about that dream you had last ? ” said he. “ Or rather, tell me the words of the dream ? ”

“ The words,” said Violet, “ were, ‘ I am the Vesprie luck—the good luck of the Vespries and my own bad luck ! ’ But surely it means nothing ; and I scarcely know why I told you about it.”

The vision of the Home for destitute girls rose once more before him and reproached him. He felt that this vision of Violet had a mysterious meaning, and for some time he remained silent.

“ And now,” said Brandon, “ I must bid you farewell.”

“ Farewell ! ” said Violet. “ Why I have scarcely seen you. This is a great disappointment. And I have been looking forward to seeing you for so long.”

As she spoke Brandon perceived that her eyes were filling with tears, and he was on the point of saying to her, “ Let us turn back to the Towers, and I will postpone my return.” But the idea of the girl’s indomitable worldly pride and the picture of the Greenland Mission House, the English Herrnhut that he was to build and the vision of the Home for destitute girls came before him and he said, “ I am expected in London to-night, and the train I must catch is the twelve-forty train.”

She grasped his hand and said, “ But you will come back to see me, Mr. Brandon ? ”

“ Certainly,” said Brandon, as he moved away, “ if I may.”

“ If you may ? ” said Violet. “ Why you are the only friend I have in the world—the only one.”

"Miss Vesprie," said he, "you really must not live alone any longer, and you really must let me send you two worthy friends of mine who will be delighted to serve you in every way until I am able to return and see you again." And raising his hat he passed behind the trees and she saw him no more.

After the little boat containing Brandon and Violet had turned the corner, and passed out of sight, Martin Redwood gazed into his mother's face. His eyes looked as luminous as ever, but his features looked five or six years older. His mother perceived that there were positively incipient lines of age upon his cheeks and at the corners of his eyes. A great tragedy of the soul was going on within.

It was that struggle of the soul which does not know whether the fires in which it is being burnt are the fires of love or the fires of hate—

"To be wroth with one we love  
Doth work like madness in the brain."

He felt that he could have slain the proud girl whom he had been loving so deeply, and then have slain himself. His love of the patrician idea vanished like lightning. If at that moment a revolution had been going on in England, if there had been a rising of the lower orders, plebeian against patrician, similar to that of the great French Revolution, he would have joined it, he would have leapt into the front ranks with a yell of hate, and then struck right and left at aristocracy with merciless blood-thirstiness. The pride of the poet, ten thousand



times greater than the pride of the patrician, had been lacerated by the fangs of aristocracy, and he yearned to see all the patrician idea incarnated in one, and the neck of that one on the block of the guillotine. And all this on account of a young girl's heedless words !

Intense as had been his love of Violet Vesprie, his new-born feeling towards her—was it hatred or what ?—was more intense still.

His mother perceived that he was a different man from what he had been a few minutes before, and she did not speak a word, but left him to his thoughts.

This incident opened a new chapter in his life.

Upon most natures such an experience would have worked a marked effect, but Martin Redwood was an idealist, he was a poet. Yes, that was the fantastic fate of this unlucky young man. He was the son of a blackguard prize-fighter. He could not disguise from himself that he had inherited from the blackguard father a magnificent physique, a rare beauty in which the elements of the Celt and the Saxon were combined ; and from his mother he had inherited an intelligence and an intellectual agility as rare. As to his poetic genius, if we could say whence that came we could answer many another question ; we could understand the mystery of Chatterton's genius, and Shelley's and Keats', and, more mysterious still, Shakespeare's. Unfortunately for the patrician Shelley, his soul was in no way akin to those who were called his kin ; and it was the same with the plebeian Martin Redwood, nor was he akin to any of those with whom

he had been brought into contact. His soul was filled with dreams of beauty of which they had no notion. It was attuned to all that is noblest in this universe, and therefore it was he that belonged to Nature's own aristocracy—far more than the Vespries who thought so much of themselves.

From the moment of first seeing Violet in Vesprie Park, in the old days when he and Lawrence Vesprie were close friends, all the poetry of his nature had been focussed upon one object, the beautiful, graceful, high-born representative of the great Vesprie family. It was she who inspired that poem of his upon woman which had so much attracted Brandon's attention at the "George" Hotel.

Now came this terrible revelation of Violet's feelings about him, and from that moment it darkened his entire life.

## CHAPTER XIV

### NOTICE TO QUIT

AND now fresh changes, fresh calamities, were in store for Violet Vesprie.

One spring morning, when she was in the midst of her duties, Violet was startled by a rap at the door which she knew came from neither the butcher's boy, the baker's boy, the milkman's boy, nor the postman. She went and opened the door, and was confronted by a short, thick-set gentleman with high features but flabby cheeks.

"I am Miss Vesprie," said Violet, pulling herself up and looking straight at him.

"Miss Vesprie," said the gentleman, raising his hat, "you've been in charge of the place for a long time—have you not?"

As Violet did not move from her position or invite him to come in, he said, "I'm the solicitor, Mr. Walton, acting for the heir-at-law, and all the beneficiaries of the late Mr. Brandon, and the entire estate is to be put up to auction. I am extremely sorry for you, especially as there can be no doubt whatever that it had been Mr. Brandon's intention to leave a large legacy to you. Scraps of paper were found putting it beyond all question, but unfortunately he was a procrastinator, and he was arrested

by death before he had embodied his intention in a formally executed will."

"Mr. Brandon dead? Oh, is he dead? Is that kind, good man dead?"

And a look of sorrow spread over Violet's face.

"Yes, Miss Vesprie, he is dead."

Mr. Walton then informed Violet that Mr. Brandon had died suddenly in a fit of apoplexy, and intestate. Certain disputes had consequently arisen among the next of kin and the heir-at-law, and these, the gentleman then told her, were being adjusted by himself.

Unselfish as Violet was and disinterested as was her affection for Brandon, it had been impossible for her to recall the extraordinary interest the good man had shown in her without sometimes thinking that, if the Vesprie luck should ever come to her at all, it would be connected with this kind friend.

She stood in dismay at the news of his death, and for the first time in her life felt really alone. Still the idea of the Vesprie luck was not to be uprooted all at once.

"Don't you know," she said, "that the Vesprie estate cannot be sold? It belongs to my family after the mortgage is paid off. And though I am alone now," she added with a quiver of the lip, "I am a Vesprie, and it cannot be sold away from me. They tried to sell it before, and it can't be sold."

"Can't be sold?" said the lawyer, looking at her wistfully.

"No; my dear father told me so on his death-bed. And although my brother is dead, who was to have

paid the money, there is still the luck—luck——” Here her fortitude gave way, and although she did not sob—she was too proud for that—the tears trickled down her cheeks.

“The house cannot be sold,” she continued, making way for him as he entered the hall.

“Yes; I am sorry to say it can,” said the lawyer, evidently softened by Violet’s sorrow, “and everything in it, as far as I know.”

“Everything in it?” exclaimed Violet, and her dismay seemed to affect the man. “But you don’t mean that the furniture, the pictures, and the panels are to be sold?”

“If I were acting for my own account I should feel inclined to say no, Miss Vesprie. But I am acting only as a solicitor, and my duty forces me to say that everything must be sold, except anything that belongs to yourself. But the law compels me to act strictly in my legal capacity. It would be cruel of me not to tell you the whole truth at once, however painful it may be to you and to me! Vesprie Towers, the pictures and everything in it, are to be sold by auction. The furniture will be sold in the neighbourhood, the pictures will be taken to London and sold at Christie’s.”

“A large proportion of things have been sold already, and all that now remains inside the house belongs to the Vesprie family,” said Violet.

The stranger stood and looked at her for some time. Then he said:

“Miss Vesprie, I am sorry to have to repeat to you that nothing in this house belongs to you. It belonged to the late Mr. Brandon, who lost a great

deal of money on the mortgage of this estate. Mr. Brandon, your benefactor, allowed your family to live here rent free as caretakers—I beg pardon, tenants at will, of everything that is here. If I, as solicitor to the family, should find it in my power to act with generosity, it is far from likely that I should refuse to do so.”

“Then of course I must leave here—leave at once.”

“I am sorry to say you must,” said the lawyer. “But the date of the sale is not fixed and there will be ample time for you to make your arrangements. I should be sorry indeed to put you to unnecessary inconvenience.”

“When must I leave?”

“Oh, not for a month,” said he.

“But,” said Violet, “I promised my dear father that I would never leave!”

“I am very sorry to say it,” said the lawyer; “but I am quite powerless.”

The gentleman then slowly moved along the hall, examining the pictures as he went along.

Violet passed into the room where she was about to lunch, and for the first time since Lawrie’s death wept bitterly.

After a while she heard the gentleman returning along the passage to the front door. She dried her tears at once. But she need not have done so. The gentleman evidently shrank from a second encounter with her, for he stopped at the open door at which Violet stood and said, “Good-bye, Miss Vesprie. I am sorry to bring you such bad news. But I am quite powerless—powerless.” And he walked



away through the park and struck across towards the mere, looking at everything as he went along.

Violet sat looking out of the window across the lawn, tears trickling down her cheeks, in a dream of despair. At last she was alone indeed; Vesprie Towers had seemed to her to represent her father, her mother, her brother. To be torn from that was to be torn from them.

There are some readers of this book—they may perhaps be few—who will realise without my attempting to describe them, the thoughts and emotions that passed through Violet's mind as she sat looking out of the window. All English people love the word "home," and there is no song that they love so well as "Home, sweet Home; be it ever so humble there is no place like home."

That is true. But the word "home" to the majority of people has a very different meaning from what it had to Violet. Those who were not born in the homes of their forefathers have no idea of the word "home" to those whose earliest recollections are associated with some old structure that is connected with a long line of ancestors. To these latter not only the trees and shrubs of the park and grounds, but the structure itself—the very stones with which it is built—seem endowed with a conscious life. And who shall say that to the heir of the old estate there is not a kind of magnetic aura left in the old building and even in the beloved grounds which sheds its mysterious influence upon members of the family and none other?

## CHAPTER XV

### A LAST LOOK ROUND

THE effect of that cruel experience of Martin Redwood on the riverside grew more disastrous every day, and it soon took a somewhat alarming form. This sedate, poetic young sailor, instead of joining his ship, lingered on at Thornton and began to frequent one of the lower public-houses, the landlord of which, recently come from London, was a socialist, and some said an anarchist. Martin took to drinking, but only slowly and by degrees. Drink seemed to make him forget the scorpion sting that was maddening to him—seemed to give respite and ease.

Something seemed to chain him to the neighbourhood against his own will and he knew what it was. It was his mad passion for Violet, and he felt that he could not breathe in any other air but that of Thornton. Sometimes he would undertake some outdoor occupation, such as osier peeling, or acting as beater to the local sportsmen. His good manners seemed in some degree to leave him. Still there was something in the young fellow's accent that marked him off from the cottager and labourer.

Martin Redwood's mother became seriously concerned, and set herself energetically to reclaim her son from drink ; and when he was in a beerhouse,

to see her lingering outside in the bitterest weather, waiting for him to come out, was a pathetic sight.

One evening after a painful scene with his mother, in which she reminded him how drink had ruined his father, a new resolution came to Martin.

He would go to sea.

On the sea he would escape from every association that made his life miserable.

This was another sore trial for his poor mother, but after much thinking over the matter she came to the conclusion that it was far better for him to go.

For a long time Martin had seen nothing and heard nothing about Violet Vesprie. But one day when he was on the point of leaving Thornton to join his ship he was startled by seeing a placard at the foot of the bridge that connected Vesprie village with the town of Thornton.

It ran thus :—

“PRELIMINARY ANNOUNCEMENT.

“Messrs. Sturgeon & Co., Leadenhall Street, beg to announce that there will shortly be put up for sale at Tokenhouse Yard, the magnificent estate, ‘Vesprie Towers,’ in the county of Warwickshire, with the fine grounds and large deer park, containing two hundred acres. The property, situate mainly on the left bank of the River Vesprie, is of the finest soil in England; the park, although neglected and used as cattle lays, has not been in any degree injured. The timber has never been cut, and the trees are entirely uninjured. Immediate possession of the Towers and grounds can be given, and the other parts of the estate are held by respectable tenants under short leases.

“Further particulars, with the date of sale, will be issued shortly. Apply to the auctioneers, or to Messrs.

Walton and Walton, Leadenhall Street, or to Mr. Rook, estate agent, Thornton."

As the placard said that immediate possession would be given, Martin took it for granted that Violet Vesprie had already left the Towers.

He was deeply affected.

"I wonder what has become of her?" said he. "I wonder where she has gone, and what friends are sheltering her? Ah well! She will never now see the gutter-bird, the idea of personal contact with whom made her shudder!"

It is easy to understand why Martin and his mother believed that the Towers were unoccupied. The words "Immediate possession can be given," which they had read on the placard at the end of the bridge, had only the technical meaning familiar to men of business. They meant that possession would be given on the day of the completion of the purchase.

Redwood knew the entire story of the good Mr. Brandon, and he felt sure the owner must be dead and that Violet was gone.

The irony of the situation was that Violet Vesprie still occupied the Towers, although this was the last day of grace given to her by the solicitor.

On this morning she awoke with a start and exclaimed, "My last day—my last day of all! He told me I might stay for a month, and I have taken him at his word indeed, for the month ends to-day!"

Then came thoughts of a more practical kind.

Day by day the question had presented itself to

Violet, but she could never answer it, What was she to do ? How was she to live ? The poverty of the family had no doubt, in a certain sort of way, been a peculiar education to her, considering her rank of life. There were scores of things she could do which young ladies in a different class of life altogether could not do ; but then they were the offices done by servants, and even these accomplishments she had only picked up in a haphazard way.

She got up and made her little bed as before and was soon busy preparing her last breakfast at the Towers.

After this she went into the old stableyard to feed the pigeons for the last time. When the birds alighted upon her shoulders, and put their beaks to her lips, she fairly broke down and began to sob.

She took a long stroll round the park and grounds. The great rookery was so noisy and busy that she found it impossible now to feel very depressed. Never before had the cawing of the birds seemed so loud.

Then she returned to the Towers and made a substantial luncheon on cold viands that had been left from the previous day. She took another ramble round the old place, looking at everything as through a mist. Then she strolled through the garden and out into the park towards the mere.

She sauntered along the bank of the mere, and then returned across the deer park towards the bend in the backwater near the river and osier holt where the skiff was moored, to give a last look at this skiff which she had so often used.

She then returned to the Towers, for she had given herself but little time to attend to the momentous duties of packing up the few articles that she considered she was entitled to take with her.

Mr. Walton had told her that everything in the place belonged to the representatives of Mr. Brandon, and therefore to remove anything would be stealing. She was too intelligent not to understand that if her father owed the mortgagee more money than the land and the park and the Towers and its belongings were worth, everything must belong to the mortgagee. She felt that her father's death was, in a certain sense, her own. If, therefore, she were to remove anything belonging to the owners of the estate it would be a slur upon the family honour.

Such things as she felt must belong to her and her family, the clothes that they had worn, she had missed a long while back, during Mrs. Jordan's time ; and when she asked the old servant what had become of them, that good creature was obliged to confess that she had, during the winter, sold them to buy coals.

There was then only her own meagre stock of clothes that she could honestly take away with her—only these, and, of course, the rainbow topaz, the luck of Vesprie Towers.

She went upstairs and turned out of the drawers her stock of clothes and linen. The articles were few indeed, and some of them much worn. She selected the best of these clothes and the few trinkets that had come to her through her mother, and put them into an old box with "V" cut upon



it, locked it, corded it up herself, and then she sat down to think what she was going to do.

After a time a certain thought struck her so forcibly that she suddenly jumped up, clasped her hands and exclaimed, "Yes, that's what I will do—that's what I will do! I will go to-day."

She then took half a sheet of notepaper, wrote upon it, "Miss Vesprie—Passenger to London," and not being able to find any gum or paste in the house stuck it on the box with white of egg.

She took her worn purse from her pocket to count the money she had about her. It was the remains of what the greengrocer had lately paid her for the considerable quantity of vegetables taken away. It amounted to five pounds and a few shillings.

"This will be ample," said she, "more than ample!" And her resolution had the effect of most resolutions in such a dilemma, it made her feel more cheerful.

The spirit of adventure had come, and she thought of all the wonders that her father had told her of the great world outside the Towers, especially of London.

She then left the house and the grounds, walked briskly across the old bridge and down the High Street to the railway station. She was entirely unknown to the porter to whom she addressed herself, but there was a style about her which commanded respect.

"I want you to come," said she, "to Vesprie Towers to bring away a large box."

"Vesprie Towers? I didn't know anybody lived there—only the ghostses."

"*I live there, and I am going to leave ; and I want you to come and fetch my box.*"

"All right, miss," said the porter. "I'll bring my truck along."

"Yes," said she, "and I will go back at once to the Towers."

The porter was so long before he started for the Towers that the afternoon train was gone by the time he reached there, and Violet determined to let him take the luggage to the station, but to wait before going herself until the next day.

When the porter arrived with his truck he found everything ready for him. But when he understood that she was not going till the next day he felt inclined to linger and look about the mysterious place of which he had heard so much gossip. And no doubt he would have lingered, except for the authoritative expression on the young lady's face.

Violet's mind had been so occupied that it was evening before she realised how the time had passed.

So long as the light lasted she wandered about the place, from passage to passage, from room to room. And by the time she turned into bed she was thoroughly weary, and soon fell into a sound sleep. But not a dreamless one. The night was passed in visions of Vesprie luck.

Next morning was occupied in another long ramble round the grounds and the deer park. When she reached the towpath beside the river, she went along until she reached the bridge.

When she approached the bridge it seemed to her that the weekly market was taking place on

the other side ; and she thought, as she had much time on her hands, that she would like to give it a last look.

From the great osier island she had often and often enjoyed the sight of the market on the opposite bank. She went upon the island and looked across the river.

Sprinkled over the grass of the osier holt the white-peeled rods glistened in the sun. The stumps from which they had been stripped looked a little forlorn. The air was filled with the aroma shed by the newly peeled-off bark.

Whilst Violet was lost in this spectacle, which seemed like a dream, she was startled by hearing voices behind her, and upon looking round was a little dismayed at seeing a party of cottagers, whom she knew at once to be osier peelers, passing on to the ait by the narrow isthmus by which she herself had passed.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ROD-PEELERS

It so chanced that this was the day of the annual osier feast which took place at the end of the osier season; and Martin Redwood and his mother had promised to attend.

The time of the osier-peeling depended of course on the forwardness or the backwardness of the season. For some reason or another the cottagers during the osier-peeling were more boisterous than at other seasons—hay-making, for instance, or harvest work; and at the close of the day there were certain sports into which they would press anybody who approached the islet. This place, which was not really an islet, but a queerly-shaped peninsula, very long and narrow, was probably a mudbank originally. At the end of the osier-peeling season there was a ceremony which, although there was nothing in it that could be called improper, was specially rough and boisterous, and this was called rod-kissing.

At the conclusion of the rod-peeling season it is the custom of the rod-peelers to have a feast, of which the rod-kissing game was the principal feature.

During the entire osier season a few of the finest of the osier rods are picked out and set apart for

the game. At the end of the season a certain number of these are bound up into a fagot—that is to say, half as many willow wands as the number of the osier-peelers present are so bound up that no one can distinguish the two ends which belong to the same wand.

On the day of the conclusion of the rod-peeling, the rod-peelers are arranged in two rows as in a country dance. They then draw up to the fagot and surround it, each man taking one end of the wand, each woman the other end, without knowing who will be his or her actual *vis-à-vis*. And when everything is quite ready the withes binding the various little fagots are cut by the ganger, and then it is of course found that one end of a given rod is grasped by a woman, the other by a man; and the fun of the thing lies in this: the rods in the fagots are so craftily arranged that no peeler has any means of knowing who is grasping the other end of his or her rod until the withes are cut. The rod-peelers then again spread themselves out in double lines, each couple grasping a rod. It is then the law of the game that each woman is expected to advance towards the man, drawing her hand along the rod, and then on reaching him to kiss him. Should any one of the women, on discovering that her *vis-à-vis* is objectionable to her, refuse to do this, the man is disgraced and buffeted by the other women out of the company, and sometimes ducked in the river. The insult of being ejected in this way is so great that men have been known to mope for a year under it.

This custom is akin to an old harvest custom in

Servia and Central Europe. The song which the Servian peasantry sing or chant during the game is thus rendered by Sir John Bowring in his "Servian Popular Poetry," 1827 :

"HARVEST SONG.

"Take hold of your reeds, youths and maidens ! and see  
Who the kissers and kiss'd of the reapers shall be.  
Take hold of your reeds, till the secret be told,  
If the old shall kiss young, and the young shall kiss  
old.

Take hold of your reeds, youths and maidens ! and see  
What fortune and chance to the drawers decree ;  
And if any refuse, may God smite them—may they  
Be cursed by Paraskev, the saint of to-day !  
Now loosen your hands—now loosen, and see  
Who the kissers and kiss'd of the reapers shall be."

But it is not, I believe, common in England, in the harvest field or the osier ait, except in the locality in which this story is laid—a locality far removed from what may be called the osier counties, and possessing indeed only one osier ait within a radius of many miles.

If it chance that the number of the men and women are not equal, the rod-peelers can claim the right to seize upon the nearest bystanders or passers-by, no matter what rank of life ; and in such a case the bystander who refuses to be pressed is dragged to the ranks by main force.

The rod-peelers, who had all gone home to clean themselves up and dress themselves, were now returning and were busy preparing for the ceremony.

At first they did not perceive Violet owing to the



clump of willows between them and herself, as they proceeded with their preparations for this peculiar ceremony, connected with the end of the rod-peeling season, before described, a ceremony which Violet had never witnessed.

Evidently there was a hitch in the proceedings of the rod-peelers, for one said, "But he'll be here directly. He promised to come, and then there'll be a man too much."

The rod-peelers were evidently fearful that there would be a fiasco on the arrival of a man expected, when some female passing by would have to be pressed into the service according to the venerable custom before alluded to.

At this moment one of the women perceived Violet, and set up a whoop of triumph, exclaiming, "Why, there's a gal a-standin' lookin' across the river! She'll do."

"Don't let us be rough," said another young woman, named Liz Curtis, a pretty, flighty girl who lived with her grandmother; "I'll go and ax *her* to come. And I dussay she will."

"You dussay she *will*?" said another. "She *must*. She'll have to be pressed if she don't come willin'!"

Liz went up to Violet, saying, "Good a'ternoon, miss! I see you're a stranger, miss—don't the meadows look nice across the river?"

"Very," said Violet, civilly, pleased that she had not been recognised. But when Violet glanced across the ait, and saw what looked very like preparations for a country dance, she perceived that she was in danger. Her courage, however, rose

with the occasion, and a defiant look spread over her face.

"This is our osier feast," said Liz. "We can't make up the number o' women by one."

Violet suddenly remembered how Lawrie had told her about a certain rod-kissing game on the osier ait, and how the osier-peelers claimed the right to press passers-by into the affair, if circumstances required, and she was seized with an involuntary fit of laughter. This was misunderstood by the women, and it now became evident to Violet that she was about to be pressed herself into the ceremony.

"We can't get on with the game 'cos we've got one too many," said Liz.

"What have I to do with you and your osier feast?" said Violet. "Let one of the men drop away. At least leave me alone!"

"That's just where it is. Which on 'em *is* to drop away? An' the man as drops away will have bad luck for a year. An' there'll be a fight over it yet. Oh, it's only jist the osier-peelers a-standin' in two rows opposite each other," she added.

She was careful not to mention the kissing part of the ceremony lest the stranger should refuse to join the game.

"Will you be so kind?" said the girl.

"So kind?" said Violet; "so kind as to do what?"

"As to come and stand beside o' me at the osier feast. It's only for a minute."

Violet shook her head as a sign of denial. The girl began to importune her.

Violet liked cottagers in a patronising sort of way as we already know, but to be kissed by one of them was more than she could submit to. But at this moment she saw the only sight that would have unnerved her. There stood the dread foe—Joan Redwood. There was something about her so different in look and bearing from that of the other cottagers.

Two or three of the girls came up and asked her to stand in the row, and she thought it would be better to stand up with a good grace rather than submit to force, as she knew she would have to do. But she determined that she would not submit to the final indignity. And she walked over to the osier-peelers, taking her place among the women with the rest.

As she did so the missing man came on the ait, looked in amazement at her and then took his place opposite her. He evidently for some reason disguised himself as much as he could by pulling his sailor's cap over his brow.

The man and woman at the further end of the pile soon ended their part of the matter. The woman passed her hand along the rod, moved towards the man, kissed him on the forehead, and seemed to enjoy it. So with the second, and so with the third pair. But in the fourth pair was an elderly woman named "Meg," a favourite in the neighbourhood, the man opposite to her being a splendid young gypsy, dressed in the tip-top of gypsy fashion, who had come from an encampment some distance off.

As soon as the man saw Meg move towards him

he gave a start and shrank. The woman's eyes were lit up at once with a luminous twinkle and she said, "Yis, a gypsy chap may well feel a little awk'ard at bein' kissed by a Christian woman; but Meg ain't so proud as you think, my bor. She's never kissed a yallar-skinned gypsy afore in all her life. But Meg ain't a party to sp'ile a good game jist for a little pride. So here's for you." And she sprang forward, clasped the man in her arms so tightly that he gasped for want of breath, and then she gave him a smack on the lips like the sound of a pistol-shot.

Released from Meg's tremendous grip the man instinctively rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth to wipe away the kiss.

"Ah, I know'd he'd want another. Fust time he was kissed by a Christian woman, I warrant." And in a moment the man was again pinioned in Meg's arms and another smack sounded along the island.

"Now," she said, "If you want another, wipe this off, an' I'll give you a third!"

This remark was followed by peals of laughter from the rod-peelers and others on the ait.

The attention of all was so centred on Meg and her victim that the other kissing went on without attracting much notice, until the turn came for Mrs. Redwood, who stood about midway.

There was something in her appearance that made the yokel opposite to her pause before kissing her, but he eventually performed the ceremony, though with evident nervousness.

When it was perceived that at one end of the rod

stood "the stranger," and at the other Martin Redwood, there was a dead silence. Mrs. Redwood now stood still as a statue, gazing at her son.

It would take a stronger pen than this of mine to record the warring emotions in the breast of this remarkable woman. Her hatred of the Vespries had been roused by the knowledge that her son was madly in love with the last of the race. But the triumph she felt at the dilemma in which Violet was placed was dashed by the thought that if she did yield to the custom and kissed her son, this might only increase his mad passion for her; and then came the dread that if she refused her son would be the laughing-stock of the place, and lose the self-respect he had gained and lapse into the drinking habits. This last thought was too much for her; anything would be better than that. She must force the girl to comply with the custom.

An expression of sad intensity overspread her face, for she was only too well aware of Martin's passion for Violet and the mischief it had worked upon his life.

Martin stood motionless, looking down the file of rod-peelers.

Violet, who had never, as far as she knew, seen him before, and therefore did not know who he was, stood for a moment and looked at him with a curious amused smile on her lips that had nothing in it of sarcasm and a great deal of humour, and slowly dropped the rod. Martin did the same, and bent his eyes on the ground.

At this there was a shout of derision against the

young sailor. "He must be ducked—he must be ducked!" cried several voices.

"I am sorry for that poor chap," said Liz. "It'll be bad for him."

"Why?" said Violet.

"'Cos he'll be the butt of everyone in Thornton for the next twelve months. He's the great scollard, they say, and used to try an' be the fine gentleman. But o' course it can't be helped—o' course *you* can't kiss him, miss!"

At this moment Mrs. Redwood stalked up to her son and stood between him and Violet. Turning to Violet, she said, "Why can't you do as the others do? You stood up in the game and you knew what the game was."

"Leave her alone, mother," said Martin in an authoritative tone.

Violet remained silent, and this irritated the woman. Then she said, "I was told that I should be spared this part of the game."

"That's true; I did tell her," said Liz.

"That don't signify. It's the old custom," said many voices; "and she's been pressed, and she must go through with it."

"Will you leave her alone?" repeated Martin, glancing about him, and in a voice that was now angry.

Martin's last words had a strong effect on the rod-peelers, who, not knowing Violet by sight, felt that a slight was being put upon them all by a fellow plebeian.

A British plebeian, however low down in the scale, will placidly accept every kind of pretension



of superiority if the person that makes it is evidently and indubitably an aristocrat. But this has to be manifest and unchallengeable, and especially declared by the person's dress. It is a very different case, however, if the person's aristocratic domineering rights of insolence are at all contestable.

Violet looked into the face of Liz, beside her, in a somewhat reproachful way which made the girl call out defiantly,

"I told her that she'd only got to stand up. An' don't you be so rude to her—don't you be rude to her. It ain't a bit likely she's goin' to kiss a rod-peeler and a chap she don't know!"

"I'll throw every man into the river, one after the other of you, if he dares to insult her!" said Martin fiercely.

"Dang him, he could do it too!" said another, the shepherd whom Brandon had talked to, "if he liked. He's about as strong as the Slasher himself, and he's got a devil of a temper of his own too, I know!"

Violet's courage now rose even against Joan Redwood. Then she said,

"Let the man come and kiss me if he dare. I will not submit to it!"

"Why don't she follow the rules o' the game?" said Joan. "She'll make my poor boy go to the bad again. He got over the drink through my seeing after him."

Turning to his mother, Martin said in a hoarse whisper, "It's Miss Vesprie."

"I know all about that. An' that's the more

reason why she should follow the rules o' the game," she answered. Then softening her tone, she said, turning to Violet, "An' though you don't know it, *I* do—he has worshipped you—worshipped the very ground you tread on."

"*Me!*" murmured Violet; "I never saw him in my life! And even now I can hardly see his face, which he is hiding away from us."

"But he's seen *you* often enough," said Mrs. Redwood. "He has been giving all his life to you without your knowing it."

"My good woman," said Violet. "I can't imagine what you mean. You must surely be out of your mind!"

"Who was it," said Mrs. Redwood, "that used to light your fires in the morning, an' clean your shoes, an' bring the cabbages in, just to save you a little work?"

Violet looked in the woman's face in blank amazement.

"Yes, 'cos you used to live alone in the great house. He never slept in the cottage once, but he would go creeping up to the great house, and slept in the kitchen all among the blackbeetles, just to protect you from burglars!"

"Will you stop that, mother?" said Martin. "Will you stop all that and let her go? Will you stop it, mother? Or must I make you?"

But Mrs. Redwood still continued with added volubility, "And who was it broke the poor boy's heart and made him turn to drink? It was you! He heard you on the osier holt talking to some of your fine friends. Yes, everybody says my boy

was a very respectable boy, an' fond o' book learning and everything that was good, until you soured him and spoilt him with your fine lady talk ! And now you're too proud to follow the rules o' the game. But you'll have to do it ! A Vesprie will have to go up to a Redwood and kiss him. You can't escape."

These words seemed to have an extraordinary effect upon Violet, and she muttered, "Lawrie's friend, it's Lawrie's faithful friend, and a friend to me in my loneliness !"

"And he'll be laughed at by everybody," continued Mrs. Redwood. "He was getting a little better, and getting off the fretting about you. And now he'll go to the bad, if you treat him like a dog. They'll all be makin' fun of him, and he'll go to the bad."

The girl looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Redwood and murmured, "Lawrie's friend !"

The rod-peelers were now silenced by expectancy. There was now not a sound on the osier ait, except the twittering of the reed-sparrows and the "Chee'p-chee'p," of the moorhens.

Martin went up and seized his mother's wrist, and pulled her back, "Stop it !" said he. "If she had come up to kiss me I would not have let her—not I ! I would not have let those proud lips of hers touch my face if I knew it."

"But she shall—she shall !" said Joan. "Why shouldn't she ? You're as good as she. There ain't a finer chap in all Thornton, though I say it as your mother. And then look at your book learning."

"Mother," said Martin, "I should be sorry to do it, but if you say another word I shall have to be rough with you; I shall take you and swing you off the ait. Yes, you've been a good mother to me, and I used to be a bad son; but if you say another word I shall have to be rough with you."

"Why can't she do as the others do, an' save you from being the laughing-stock of all Thornton? If there's anybody that ought not to break the rules o' the game, and do as the others do, it's this fine lady whose nasty sneers made my boy go wrong."

Murmuring the word, "Lawrence!" Violet took up the rod from the grass and went towards Martin and held it out. But Martin refused to take it, and stood there motionless.

Violet stepped up to him, lifted his cap and put her hand upon his hair, and kissed him on the forehead. Then Martin turned up his face towards Violet and gazed at her. She stood and looked at him as though transfixed and murmured, "The eyes are the same as the eyes that came to me in my dream—the Vesprie luck! Oh, what can it mean? Forgive me," said she, "for Lawrie's sake."

A shudder seemed to pass through Martin's frame. He shrank from her and turned away.

There rose from the osier-peelers a great shout of applause. Peal after peal of huzzas rang out. And then cries of "She's the right sort—no stuck-up nonsense about she, though she be a Vesprie!"

Violet wended her way back to the dear old home.

"I will return to the Towers and sleep there for the night, and go to London in the morning."

Not caring to return by way of Thornton Bridge, she determined to walk on to Broadwood Bridge, a distance of about two miles, and so reach the park by the footpath which led through the wood called Broadwood and the Broadwood estate, which formerly belonged to her own ancestor.

Every pathway was familiar to her.

The path she took skirted the old ruined tower. She stopped and looked at it.

"How singular," she cried, "that I did not come this morning to bid farewell to the old ruin!" And she felt quite glad of her forgetfulness about the key of the Towers which had resulted in her making this final visit, for it gave her an opportunity of seeing the old place.

She lingered about the ruins, recalling incident after incident with Lawrie which had taken place there. Then she climbed up the broken stone staircase, and reached the room that Lawrence had furnished. There, on the railed dais were the chair and table and even the rug upon which they used to sit and tell their visions of the Vesprie luck.

The spell of this room was so great that she forgot the passage of time. She took from her bag some of the buns and biscuits that she had bought at the little shop at Broadwood and proceeded to make her evening meal. When she left the ruins she lingered by the Imp Tree.

By the time she approached the Towers the evening had died into twilight, but there was a

bright moon which lit up the wood in a magical way.

To Violet the very voices of the birds had a timbre richer and rarer than to any other ear: to her indeed the nightingale was the very same bird whose song had been listened to by her forbears—yes, even by Hugh the Crusader and Gertrude. She was a sufficiently good ornithologist to know that they were certainly descendants of the nightingales that had warbled to generations of Vespries. She was familiar with the conservative habits and instincts of the nightingale. She knew that it will build its nest in the very same tree that it has inhabited all its musical little life—the same tree in which its ancestors had built and sung for ages—and that it will not leave its beloved tree, howsoever inviting the young trees around have grown to be.

She knew that this applied to all the other birds, and indeed to every wild thing in Vesprie Park and grounds.

But while these thoughts were occupying her mind, a sound broke upon her ear which made her clap her hands with delight and exclaim,

“When the cuckoo sings at night  
Vesprie luck is shining bright.”



## CHAPTER XVII

### A MOONLIGHT VISION

AFTER that painful scene with the rod-peelers on the osier ait, Martin Redwood was racked with a sense of conflicting passions in which love and deadly anger strove with each other.

That night he wandered across Vesprie Park, knowing not whither he went, so much was he absorbed in his thoughts. The moon had risen over the Towers. With a start of surprise he found himself standing before the entrance door.

For a long time he stood before the building looking at it. "It is not love," said he; "it is not that, it cannot be. It shall not be that!"

He went to the front door and rapped two or three times, but on trying the handle of the door it was to his surprise unlocked. He opened the door and stood looking down the vast picture-panelled hall.

He stood so long on the threshold that the sparrows evidently lost all fear of him, for they fluttered outside close to his feet.

"Are you greeting the gutter-bird?" he murmured to the sparrows. "Or do you really take me to be one of the Vespries? The family he belongs to is the lowest of the low—whose very flesh is of

so common a mould that a patrician girl shudders at the idea of touching it, and can only do so under compulsion. The pariah of pariahs in a country which has won every kind of freedom for itself save one—freedom from the tyrant caste—enters this house just left by the last of the Vespries! The son of a pugilist! What would Violet Vesprie say if she were to see me standing here? And what should I do if she came upon me now? What *should* I do? Should I be fool enough to let my hatred of the proud class, of which *she* is the proudest, melt in the light of her beautiful eyes? If I did I would at once walk across the park and throw myself into the mere.”

He passed up the hall and from room to room, still thinking of the wonderfulness and inscrutableness of life. “I have had but one enemy and ill-wisher in the world—Violet Vesprie! She came between me and her brother, who had done so much to soften the agony of the branding iron with which fate was branding me. She came between me and the one creature that I loved and had cause to love. She has ruined me, destroyed me, made me selfish and odious! Suppose she were to return now? What should I do?

“It was not love that thrilled my frame when her lips touched my forehead on the osier ait. Lip to lip, flesh to flesh, there we were, the pauper girl whom my miserable sophistry had given a false position to—the pauper girl and the pauper poet. I hate her! She is the only person in the world that I do hate!

“What should I do if she came back now? Well

—well, she won't come back. The gutter-bird is going to explore her nest before he leaves it and England for ever!"

He wandered about the place into which the moon was shining brilliantly through the south-eastern windows. The panelled portraits seemed alive and talking to him.

"Violet's ancestors!" he said, "I wonder what the Slasher's ancestors were? I suppose the Slasher's son had paternal ancestors more remote than his immediate progenitor. Who were my paternal ancestors, I wonder, before the Flood? What was the difference then between the blood of the Vespries and the blood of the Redwoods? Was the difference *then* so great that the primeval Vesprie's flesh must not touch the flesh of the primeval Redwoods?"

He stood for a while lost in thought.

Suddenly he cried out with a bitter laugh, "What a fool I am—what a fool I am! My business is to dismiss this girl from my mind."

At last he reached the breakfast room. On the little tray was the very loaf from which she had eaten. And on a sideboard were two other loaves—which the baker's boy had evidently left the day before—a little corner of cheese, somewhat dry; and there was the tumbler from which she had drunk some water for the last time.

"Yes," said he, lifting up the tumbler in which there still remained a few tablespoonfuls of water, "she's a water-drinker."

And he turned the glass round as if to try and

discover where her lips had touched it, and then he put his lips to it and drank the water off.

Then he went towards Lawrie's room and placed his hand on the door-handle, meaning to turn it very gently ; but his hand shook as though with palsy and the lock rattled. He pushed the door open and felt as much agitation as if he expected to see her there.

At last, with still more agitation, he went to the room where he knew she used to sleep.

It was some time before he could bring himself to open that sacred door, but he did so at last.

There was the little bed ; made as neatly for the last time as though she meant to sleep in it to-night. A little brass bed with a tester covered with a drapery of that rose-tint pink which he knew she loved.

He walked up to the bed. He would have loved to throw himself on the bed, but he could not—he dared not. Instead of this he knelt down by the bedside and threw his arms on the counterpane, and his head upon his arms, and his lips upon the drapery. Did he pray ? Perhaps so. The scene is too sacred for further words from the historian of this man's life.

This alone need be said. That, mighty as has been the power of love in the human race, never did man worship woman more passionately than did this stricken poet, whose father was a pugilist, worship the last representative of the greatest old family in England.

It is only a poet who really knows what love at its tensest can really be. For it is he alone who can

read to the full in the loveliness of a lovely girl the beauty that throbs at the heart of nature.

It was some time before Redwood rose and walked to the window, through which the moonlight was shining brightly. "How many times has that same moon shone here upon a beautiful face and lit up the golden curls around it!"

After a time he threw up the window. Leaning his arms upon the window sill, he looked out into the night.

Suddenly, he gave a start and exclaimed, "Violet—Violet's wraith!—is she dead—is that her spirit? Or is it the spirit of that girl, her ancestress, who is said still to haunt the grounds?"

In the dark shadow of the spreading cedar trees there stood Violet looking up at the building. Then the sight vanished.

"It was a spectral illusion," said he; "but it shows how my very being is filled with the image of this girl, whom it should be a point of honour with me and a point of duty to scorn and hate. Time for me to leave this! I am beginning to feel how wisely I have acted in determining to quit England! How can I live here when the entire building is filled with her image? Yes, I must get as far as possible away from Vesprie Towers. I will turn over a new leaf. I will fly from this place and never see it again."

His meditation was suddenly interrupted by an appearance in one of the windows which he had not noticed before, owing to the intervention of some boughs. This was a light in one of the windows

at an angle of the Towers. There could be no mistake about it—the ruddy light mixed with the moonlight outside. The room was the same that he had lately visited, Lawrie's room, which he remembered so well.

What could this mean? He had inferred from the words of the announcement of the sale of the Towers, "Immediate possession can be given," that the Towers was quite unoccupied. But evidently someone was there now. Was it a caretaker, or had someone entered the place after himself? Or had someone done so unlawfully like himself?

The door was ajar; he pushed it open and entered.

He was confronted by a sight that stopped his pulses—Violet's beautiful face.

There she was sitting in the antique chair before described, which was said by tradition to have belonged to her ancestor, Childe Rowland, the chair which was called the lucky chair—sitting before the same antique Jacobean table—sitting there, her head thrown gently back against the carved crest of the chair-back, fast asleep. The warm light from the candle threw over her face and neck a deep rosy light, and turned the little golden curls, clustering down her cheek and round the throat, into the rich colour of burnished copper.

She seemed to him more lovely by far than when he had seen her with the sunlight upon her in the osier ait—more lovely by far than the dream-image of her which he had been striving to drive from his mind.



He suddenly withdrew and gently pulled the door in the same position as that in which he had found it.

He passed along the corridor which seemed illuminated by the vision he had just left.

The warfare of conflicting emotion that was going on within him, the struggle of pride and resentment with love, was so great that beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead as he groped his way downstairs. When he reached the lower floor he sat down upon the bottom stair, swaying like a tree in the wind.

Young as he was, Martin Redwood had known, we may be sure, a greater variety of emotions than any poet of his time. For in these days poets do not lead chequered lives. But the great crisis in Martin's life was at work as he sat at the bottom of those stairs.

"There is more of the pride of race in her face when she is asleep," he said to himself, "than when she is awake. Often have I watched her, flitting about the empty house when she has thought herself alone, and been repelled even in my fool-days by the beauty-curse of that lovely mouth, and the proud bearing of that neck and shoulders. But as she sits there asleep there is shed from every feature that cruel pride of race which makes me hate her! Yes, it is hate that is burning up my soul and body! It must be hate. Love it cannot be—no, no! I am an abject creature, no doubt, but I'm not so bad as that. If I thought it was love I would go and throw myself into the mere. And yet, God help me! What is it that makes me feel, as I

think of those cruel lips, that to feel them once on my own I would yield up every aspiration that I once had before I knew that I sprang from the offal of the earth. It is the beauty of her lips that maddens me. Everything about her puts the beauty of all other women into the shade. But I feel that my pride has resisted everything else—the divinely lit eyes—the grace of the form and the movement—I feel that I could have resisted everything but her mouth, the proud curve of which seems conscious of my inferiority and my love.

“But the bravest of all girls that ever lived is Violet Vesprie, who has lived in the Towers alone, without knowing that she had a guardian who would save her from the smallest harm.”

Then he rose and began to move upstairs, murmuring, “It will be the last sight of her for ever, but I must see her again this once.”

When he reached the door he pushed it open again. There she was, exactly as he had left her, except for the expression on the face.

She was evidently now in a beautiful dream, for the lips were moving, and as Martin approached her he heard the words that made him quite sure what she was dreaming about.

In her dream she was evidently living over again her experience of that autumn day so firmly impressed on his own memory when he saw her standing underneath the Vesprie Oak gazing at the mirrored rainbow in that wide part of the back-water which opened into the mere. After a while he heard her say, “Are you the Vesprie luck?”

And then she seemed to be listening to a reply.

And then a smile went dimpling over her face and the lips seemed to be shaping themselves into a kiss.

“ My God ! how beautiful she is—what a vision of loveliness ! This is the true Violet, the Violet as nature made her. The other, the scornful Violet of vulgar convention, is another person. This Violet, the Violet of the sweet dream, would have clasped me and said, ‘ There is one thing can make us equal—love ! ’ How can I blame her with reason ? How can I hate her ? Hate her ? Fool ! It has never been hate at all. It has been love. I shall love her as long as I live ! ”

The expression on his face as he slipped into the room, round the table and behind her, was that of a man who was committing sacrilege. It was not merely that the scion of a house of disgrace was intruding into the presence of a daughter of the Vespries—a man in the dead of night in an empty house was intruding into the sacred precincts of beautiful and innocent maidenhood. For the first time in his life he was doing a thing of which he was ashamed ; for the first time in his life he was assaulting the citadel of his great pride. But he could not help it. He was drawn into the aura surrounding the object of his worship. He felt helpless in the toils of that fascination.

And now for the first time he perceived on the table in front of Violet a beautiful jewel. He recognised it as the rainbow topaz which Lawrence Vesprie had once shown him—the family heirloom, known as “ the Vesprie luck.” It was lying in its soiled and ragged leathern case. Martin Redwood took out the jewel and held it up to the light, and

was so soon lost in a dream about it that it seemed to him that he could see in its depths a lovely face which at one moment seemed Violet's, at another the face of his sister Molly. At last he restored the jewel to its case and stood looking in the same dreamy way at the sleeping girl.

"The dream is still with her," he said, bending his face across the table to see the way in which her lips began to stir, like dreaming rose leaves fluttering in the wind. Again she murmured, "You are indeed the Vesprie luck!"

Martin bent his face still further over the table, and when her lips again formed themselves into a kiss he put his own gently upon them. He drew his face back, for the beautiful eyes opened wide upon him, but they were still full of sleep.

He moved rapidly away, and in a second had slipped behind the old armour of Sir Hugh Vesprie, which he had so often examined. As he stood there Martin realised the rash thing he had done. He stood trembling in his place of concealment, expecting a shriek of horror, but none came. Feeling confident, he now peeped round and saw her quietly sink down into her chair again. She seemed as though she expected him to be standing there.

She then took up her candle and left the room.

Martin remained in the moonlit room gazing at the panel pictures upon which the moonlight was falling. Then he went and sat in the chair which Violet had just left.

Something which had fallen from Violet's lips after she woke worked a strange and powerful effect

upon his mind. "She saw me," he said. "Yes, she looked straight in my eyes. But I seem to her part of her dream. Her imagination accepts my face as the countenance of the Vesprie luck."

He then hurried through the corridor and left the house. But he did not leave the grounds—he could not. He stood on the pleasaunce looking at the one illuminated window.

At last the light began to move. "She is awake!" Then it vanished from the window.

"She is going to her bedroom," he said, and he ran round the angle of the building and stood before a window which he knew well, having so often watched it before.

There was the light, shining at that window now.

"She has gone to bed," he said.

His mind was so full of the vision he had seen that he well knew that he should get no sleep that night. Then why not spend the night as near to her as he could?

"She kissed me in a dream. Her lips touched mine, but she was unconscious of it. But I felt them—I feel them now. God help me! I shall always feel them although I well know that there is no power on earth that would make her press her lips upon my face when she was awake! Still it is something that in sleep she can touch them, for in sleep spirits can meet! And why should it not be so in another world? She is poor like me, and homeless. But had I all the wealth of a Vesprie nabob of old, her pride of race would prevent her touching my face with her lips. Even if I were on

the throne of King Cophetua, and she were dressed in rags, the beggar-girl Penclophon, it would be the same—the superstition is in her very blood.

“Nor would I let her. No, no ! If her pride is indomitable, so is mine.”

But still he did not stir until the dawn.



BOOK II

VIOLET VESPRIE IN LONDON



## CHAPTER I

### MRS. CARLISH'S PARLOUR FLOOR

As a cab drew up in front of a house in a quiet street out of the York Road, Lambeth, a girl sprang from the vehicle and rapped with great vivacity at a door, dingy with blistered and broken paint. A short, stout square-chinned woman with her hair in curl papers, and a large carpet-broom in her hand, answered the summons.

"Is Mrs. Jordan at home?"

"No person of that name lives here."

"But she used to live here."

"Very likely, and some one used to live here before her, and somebody else before that."

"But don't you know where she has gone?"

"Bless my soul, no! Of course I don't. I never heard her name before," grunted the woman, "I found the place was to let, and I took it. I don't know 'oo lived here before me."

During this dialogue the little woman's bright eyes travelled over the girl from head to foot.

"I've just come in by train," said the girl, "and expected Mrs. Jordan to be living here."

"And did she expect you?"

"I wrote to her and could not wait for her answer. She is slow at writing. She is our old nurse. I suddenly made up my mind to come to

London ; and as I knew nobody else in London but her, I thought I would stay with her."

" I can see you're a young lady," said the woman.

" Yes," said the girl, " I'm Miss Vesprie—what am I to do?—where am I to go ? I don't know anyone in London."

" Come inside. That cabby's on the grin."

And indeed the cabby, discovering that his fare had come to what seemed to him the wrong address, and that the woman was nevertheless asking her in, gave a sarcastic grin and put his finger to the side of his nose.

" Come inside," added the woman, "and let us talk about it."

She then turned back into the narrow passage from which she had emerged, and led the way to a shabby parlour, in which there were four chairs and a little round table covered with brown American oil-cloth, and a gaselier above it—so flimsy a gaselier that it would have seemed to be there more for ornament than use, had not the black patch above it testified that it was really a practicable gas-burner.

When Violet Vesprie got into the room the woman stood and looked at her again, and then said, " Have you got a reference from your last landlady ? "

" No," said Violet, " I have just told you that this is my first visit to London."

" The custom is a reference or a week's rent down," said the woman. " But you're from the country—I needn't be told that. There's a kind of a wild-flower smell about you, and a wild-flower look about your eyes. And besides I don't know that

references are much good. I took the last lodger with a reference, and she went away and left me three pounds in debt."

"What a shame!" said Violet.

"But I must say she played on the pianer," continued the landlady, "and I got lots o' jolly fun out o' that; and besides she left a few of 'her things behind her, and they've come in useful, so what's the odds if you are but 'appy? I certainly like the looks o' you, Miss, if you'll excuse my saying it. And if you have nowhere else to go to, you can take these two rooms for twelve shillings a week, including cooking and attendance, and sixpence a scuttle for coal, and gas another extra. Of course, I shan't expect you to be in at all meals. There's no need for that. There's a capital cook-shop round the corner, and I shall never be too proud to go out and fetch you anything. I don't keep a reg'lar servant. I'm my own chamber-maid, parlour-maid and cook. I used to have a little slut to 'elp me, but I caught her one day picking out the p'tatoes—the best brown'd uns—from out o' the pig's-fry dish, and a-dipping her fingers in the gravy, so I got out of her."

Violet made no answer. Such domestic vagaries were outside the range of her experience.

"The rooms are as cheap as dirt," the woman continued, "though dirt ain't the word to use in these rooms. For they're as clean—as clean, though I say it, as a new pin!"

At this moment Violet involuntarily looking up at the black patch, the woman added, following her glance—"I haven't been able to white-wash the

ceiling yet, but I was going to do it to-morrow. Anything to oblige."

"You are very kind," said Violet.

"Not at all, miss. It's all in the way o' business," said the landlady—"Can you play on the pianer?"

"Yes," said the girl, with a smile.

"Ah, then, that's all right—I like to listen to the pianer when it's a wet day and I can't get out and there are no organ-grinders about. I want to let my rooms and you want rooms. Shall I tell the cabby to bring your box in?"

There was something in the woman's face that inspired confidence, and Violet, not knowing what else to do, assented, and the cabman brought the box into the little parlour.

When the cabman, after growling at his fare, had withdrawn, the woman said to Violet,

"You can take the rooms for a week, and then if you like 'em you can keep 'em on."

Observing that Violet's eyes were fixed upon the oil-cloth covering the table, the glossy surface of which had cracked and peeled off, showing the canvas beneath, she added,

"As to them cracks, I've some stuff that I can fill them up with so that you could never notice them."

Violet was merely thinking how much the colour of the table-cloth reminded her of the skins of horse-chestnuts that she used to love to see shining in the long grass in Vesprie Park, and sad thoughts prevented her from answering the woman.

The landlady then led Violet into the bedroom through the folding doors.



"What a very little room!" said Violet, not by way of complaint, but by way of comment, as she recalled the vast rooms at the Towers.

"All the better for being little, as you'll find in the winter time."

"Why in the winter time?" said Violet, her thoughts still wandering.

"You can make up a good fire in the parlour," answered the landlady, "and you can throw the foldin' doors open, and there you are! You can undress by a good fire, just like a lady of the land."

By this time the woman had begun really to amuse the girl.

"And has the smallness of the room any advantage in the summer also?" said she.

"In summer," said the landlady, "if it gets rather close, you can throw up the parlour winder, keep one o' these folding' doors open, and the other door will screen you from the draughts."

"The bed seems short," said Violet, who grew more and more amused at the woman's loquacity.

"That's because you're so tall, miss," said the landlady. "But I've got the foot-board to knock off the end to make it longer when the need is, so that I can put a couple o' pillows on a little bench that I've got downstairs and make it as long as you like; and the blankets and sheets and things are just as long as they're made."

"There is one thing," said Violet, in the tone of one who wished to make the best of things—"everything certainly does look beautifully clean."

"Ah, and that's what you cannot say about many other parlours in this street," said the little woman.

She then took Violet to a chest of drawers which she saw had been very good once. They were old Dutch marquetry, with patches of veneer peeled off, and the original brass handles replaced by pieces of string thrust through the screw holes where the handles once were.

Violet turned towards the little dressing-table, which was covered with pink and white millinery that seemed like flounced petticoats and said, "How charmingly you have dressed this! I don't think I ever saw a dressing table with the legs covered away entirely by flounces like that, but it really looks very nice."

And she went up to the table and lifted the bottom of the covering from the floor.

The woman for the first time looked a little confused, for what had seemed a table was merely a structure built of one or more of those tea-chests, covered with glazed olive-coloured paper decorated with vast Chinese letters, which are to be bought from grocers for a few pence.

"Ah," said the woman—"that is the only thing that ain't genuine in the room. I hadn't got a dressing table, so I made one by tying the four chests together."

Violet could not repress a smile, and said,

"And a very nice piece of furniture it makes, to be sure! Nobody would ever know but that it was a real table; and I have no doubt that this also has certain advantages over a real table."

"Yes," said the woman, with a twinkle which showed how she enjoyed the friendly satire—"If you ever want to learn the Chinese language, you

have only to pull up the flounces, and there you are ! ”

By this time the woman had struck Violet as being perfectly delightful, and she said,

“ Did you learn your Chinese in that way ? ”

“ Yes,” said the woman, “ all that I ever did learn.”

“ It is certainly nice to know that one can always learn Chinese in one's bedroom,” said Violet, “ if one likes.”

“ The looking-glass,” continued the woman, turn- to an old heart-shaped little swing-glass that stood on the dressing table, “ is as good a glass as can be, except for these few spots in the corners—and the corners you never want to look into.”

Violet instinctively looked into the glass, but found it so loosely attached to the uprights that at whatever angle it was placed it swung into the perpendicular position.

“ Ah,” said the other, “ all that you have got to do is to prop it up in the right place with your hair brush, then you can see it at whatever slope you like.”

And so she went on all round the room, defending all the infirmities of the furniture.

The woman was so genial that Violet found fault with nothing except in a playful way, and began to feel quite comfortable.

“ Let me uncord your trunk for you,” said the landlady. And she straightway knelt down and was soon busy untying the knots.

While Violet was opening her trunk, the woman said, “ When you've unpacked your things and got

settled down, I suppose you'd like to take something. What can I get for you ? ”

“ There's nothing,” said Violet, “ that I'd like so much as some tea.”

“ What should you like with it ? ” said the woman.

“ I'm sure I don't know,” said Violet, “ what have you in the house ? ”

“ Why, God bless my soul, child, nothing ! There never is a scrap of anything eatable in this house except bread and butter and cheese. I suppose you've been used to a larder in a gentleman's mansion. But I can run out and get you almost anything. There's a cold beef and ham shop round the corner and a cook-shop opposite that, and Lord ! don't they hate each other ! And I can get you some slices of cold beef and ham, and I can get you a saveloy, or maybe some black sausage or some chitterlings.”

Violet looked bewildered.

“ Pray get me whatever you think best.” And she put some silver into her hand.

The woman ran out and soon came back with two plates, one filled with cold viands, one with warm. Violet had now returned to the little parlour and was gazing meditatively at the piano.

“ Ah,” said the woman, “ I'm glad you're fond o' the pianer, I picked as big a one as I could.”

“ Yes,” said Violet, “ it was the size of it in relation to the room and the tiny chairs that was attracting my notice. It reminds me of the very last sight I saw when I left my dear home in the country.”

“And what was that?” said the woman, who seemed interested.

“It seems as much out of proportion to the room and the things in it as a certain young cuckoo that I saw pushing the natural owners of the nest outside into the bushes. I hope,” she continued, “that the poor little chairs won’t be served by that pretentious big piano like that. I feel, after all, that I ought to have turned that rascal cuckoo out of the nest, for I’m afraid the poor little birdies are on the grass again.”

The woman looked at Violet in a bewildered way, not knowing what to reply. She set her purchases down on the table, and seemed amused at the expression on Violet’s face as she gazed at the wonderful viands.

As she went out, she said, “Some of these want dressing up. I’ve got a good fire in the stove and I’ll soon bring ’em back quite ready for you.”

After the woman had left the room, Violet sat down on one of the flimsy chairs and gazed out of the window. Comparatively quiet as the street was, it seemed to her that she was in the midst of the Babylonian whirl of which she only knew by report.

When the woman returned and brought all the requisites for the tea, Violet’s eyes at once fastened themselves upon the dish of warm viands, the black sausage and the chitterlings, and said, “I don’t think I ever saw sausages look so dark as that. And what are those other white things on the same dish? Are they really nice?”

“Nice!” said the landlady, “They’re chitterlings. Nothing in the world so tasty as chitterlings! You

know what saveloy is?" she continued, seeing Violet look at the other dish, on which were the cold meat and the saveloy.

"I suppose," said Violet, "it's that very thick looking sausage. I think, however, *I* shall content myself with the ham and beef, which really looks very nice."

And she went and sat down at the tea-table.

"The tea is made," said the landlady, "and now, if I may be so free, I should like to see you enjoy it a bit before I leave you. There's nothing I like to see so much as people enjoying their food—unless it is eating it myself."

"Please have something with me," urged Violet politely, seeing the woman's eyes fall on the food.

"Well, as you're so pressing," said the landlady with alacrity, "I will take a mossle o' the black sausage. I know you won't like it unless I do."

Violet did not remember that she had been so particularly pressing in her invitation.

The woman took part of a black sausage upon a plate, and stepping back upon the rug began to eat it, while Violet quietly sat down and took her tea and cold beef and ham.

"I dussay," said the woman, after eating the larger part of the dainties herself, "that you would now like to go to your room and arrange your things while I clear away."

Violet nodded assent and went into the bedroom and closed the folding doors.

While she was busy unpacking her trunk, she heard the door of the parlour open and someone



enter, and a conversation began between the landlady and the newcomer, who, as she found from her voice, was a young girl. They seemed to be unaware that the flimsy partition between them did not stop the sound from passing to Violet, and the word "she—she—she" soon informed her that she was the subject of the conversation.

The more the woman talked the louder grew her voice, until at last Violet could hear every word.

"My parlour floor," she heard the woman say in an ironical tone, "it's redic'lous!"

"Yes 'm," came a quaint acquiescent voice.

"Lodger in a little street like this out o' York Road, Lambeth! It's redic'lous!"

"Yes 'm."

"Some lord's daughter eloped. That's what *she* is."

"Yes 'm."

"I shall have the chap after her in a minute or two!"

"Yes 'm."

Violet heard her walk round the room and flick at a piece of furniture now and then with a duster.

Then she exclaimed—

"Takes my parlour floor—a high-stepper like that! Bosh—bosh! But what does it mean? When she comes back I'll put it straight to her, and say, 'Bosh! you're some lord's daughter in disguise! When's the chap coming?' P'raps I ought to say when's my lord coming? Now what does it mean? Why do lords' daughters come after some pretended old nurse and then take folks' parlour floors in Lambeth? I'll say, 'You'll find a friend in me,

but you *must* open up.' That's what I'll say to her the moment she comes into this room again."

At this moment Violet threw open the folding doors and came upon the landlady and a little object very carroty, very blue-eyed, and very freckled. Evidently a little Irish girl. At the sight of Violet the little girl vanished.

Violet spoke to the woman in that sweet, dignified, musical, high-bred tone of hers which fascinated everybody, and which is generally called "aristocratic," and at one time, perhaps, would have been so.

The woman, instead of putting her searching questions, quailed like a spaniel who has been doing wrong.

"You were about to speak to me, I think, when I came in?"

"I was only going to say, miss, that I am very proud to have you as a lodger."

"Oh, is that all? That's very kind of you," said Violet. "It is so nice to give satisfaction."

The woman, whose name was Carlish, made what was evidently an involuntary curtsy and went out of the room, carrying the tray with her.

Violet saw that she had unintentionally overawed the poor woman, and in her present lonely position she would much rather have been on easy confidential terms with this plebeian landlady, though, of course, without overstepping the bounds of caste—for her instinct had taught her that the quaint little creature was well-meaning and, in her way, good.

So after sitting for a long time, feeling far more

lonely in the heart of London than she had ever done in Vesprie Towers, she pulled one of the old-fashioned faded bell-ropes that hung by the side of the fire-place, and on Mrs. Carlish re-entering the room, she put to her several questions as to the street in which she found herself, and these were followed by a few questions about London.

At first the woman's answers were somewhat shy, for minute by minute she seemed to be more and more impressed by the girl's subtle distinction; but after a while her natural volubility became irresistible. She began a monologue and went right on, with very little break.

The subject of the woman's talk was so new to Violet that much of it was quite unintelligible to her. The woman lost all consciousness that she was chattering to a stranger, and mixed up her talk about her own affairs, her neighbours' affairs—as far as she had been able to learn about them, which she lamented was very little—and all other affairs in a wonderful amalgam.

The consequence of this was that Violet felt that she was not with a stranger, but with an old acquaintance, and this feeling put her quite at her ease.

That night, before going to bed, Violet took from her pocket an old leathern case. Glancing with an anxious, listening look over her shoulder, she pulled out the brilliant family heirloom, the rainbow topaz, and held it up in front of the feeble candle-light, and gazed into its many coloured facets with dreamy eyes. She had taken it from a drawer in the old bureau in her father's room at Vesprie

Towers, where it had been kept, according to a tradition, ever since the days of Lady Godiva, to whom the Godiva jewels were believed to have belonged.

“The Vesprie luck,” she murmured, “the Vesprie luck! I will never part with it, whatever happens—no, not even if starvation stares me in the face!”

And, restoring it to its case, she placed it under her pillow and crept into bed.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY DAYS IN LONDON

THE fatigues of the day caused Violet to sleep unusually soundly even for her. Her sleep indeed lasted late into the forenoon. She sprang up suddenly and caught sight of Mrs. Carlish standing between the folding doors.

“London!” she exclaimed.

“Excuse me,” said the woman, “but you lay so still that I wasn’t quite sure you were here at all. Several times I came into the front parlour and listened at the folding doors, but at last as the clock struck I thought I must look in.”

“What’s the time?” said Violet.

“Twelve o’clock.”

“Impossible—how dreadfully late!”

“Not late for *me*,” said the woman, “but I got up a couple of hours earlier than my usual time because I thought you might be famishing for your breakfast. I thought you’d like b’iled eggs, p’haps, being from the country, so I got three nice fresh uns in for you.”

“Yes,” said Violet abstractedly, for she had not yet recovered from the novelty of this new experience.

The woman then closed the doors, and Violet sprang out of bed.

To her dismay, she found that there was no bath in the room. A bath had appeared to her so inevitable a feature of the economy of life that she never thought of asking for it overnight.

This was her first experience of the bitter contrast between such forms of poverty as she had known and the forms known to the lower classes, with whom perfect cleanliness is a thing very difficult to achieve.

Hearing Mrs. Carlish moving about in the next room, she called out.

"You have forgotten the bath."

"Forgotten what?" said Mrs. Carlish.

"The bath."

"God bless my soul, child, I haven't got a bath in the house; never had one! When my lodgers want a bath, they go round the corner and get a six-penny one."

"I couldn't eat my breakfast without my bath," said Violet, disconsolately.

"Then tumble into your things, miss—tumble 'em on anyhow, and I'll take you round to the baths."

Violet did as she was bidden, and they were soon hurrying along the street towards the baths.

When they reached the place, Mrs. Carlish asked the assistant whether she might not go and see the young lady in the swimming bath, and the assistant good-naturedly allowed her to.

Violet's exploits as a swimmer not only amazed Mrs. Carlish, but the attendants and everybody there.

"She's a professional," said one of the attendants, "that's what *she* is."



On returning to her bedroom, Violet had ample opportunities of testing those excellences of the Carlish furniture upon which the owner had expatiated upon the previous day.

Through the folding doors she heard Mrs. Carlish still busy setting her breakfast. She went into the parlour and found the woman arranging the little breakfast table, upon which she had set three eggs.

When Violet attacked one of the eggs, she perceived, on the shell being broken, that the white and the yolk seemed mixed up in a way that was strange to her. On putting some of it to her lips, it seemed to taste of damp straw; and coming to the conclusion that the egg, although not rotten, had probably been packed in straw and had travelled a good deal, she left it.

“Don’t you like the egg, miss?” said the woman, “It’s a new laid un—it’s quite fresh. But London freshness is not quite the same thing as country freshness.”

“Well,” said Violet, “I can’t say that I like this egg, and I daresay the other two are like it. I suspect, Mrs. Carlish, in fact, that these eggs have come over from Ireland, and have had rather a rough passage, for the whites have got mixed up with the yolks.”

“I’m very sorry,” said the woman, with genuine disappointment.

“Have you any bacon in the house?”

“No,” said the woman, “I should never think of keeping bacon in the house to be dried up to nothing. I always go every morning to the shop and get my

slice out o' the flitch, and its always nice and moist and juicy. I'll run out and get you a nice rasher and cook it for you in a jiffy."

She ran out with the activity of a young girl; and Violet could soon smell the rasher being cooked.

"Really," said Violet, when the woman brought the bacon in, her face beaming with pleasure, "you are most attentive and kind."

"Oh, not a bit of it," said she. "It's all in the way of business, miss. But as you're not going to eat the eggs and as you're so very pressing for me to eat 'em, I think I'll just put 'em away."

And she took up the eggs and a spoon and put them away with a rapidity that excited Violet's admiration.

While Violet was still eating her breakfast, her ears were filled by the unfamiliar street cries of London. She would stop with her tea cup near her lips and listen to them as though the discordant notes were magic voices in some Arabian Nights' story.

She was in London.

"How delightful to feel that you are in London," said Violet to Mrs. Carlish. "I used to think I shouldn't mind sleeping outside on the leads if I only knew I was in London. But then," she added in a sadder tone, "but then I always used to think of going back again after my visit—going back to Vesprie Towers."

"Oh, that's the name o' the place you come from, miss, is it?" said Mrs. Carlish, "and a very pretty name too."

Violet made no answer.

When Mrs. Carlish had cleared the breakfast things away, she returned and said,

"I don't wish to intrude myself upon you, miss, but as you are quite new to London it seems to me that I might be of some use to you. It's very easy to be lost in London, you know. Is there any place that you particularly want to go to? But I think you said last night you knew nobody at all."

"Well, I need scarcely say," said Violet, "first I should like to see the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey, and the next time you go to either of them I should like to go with you. I suppose you often go?"

The woman looked at her with an amused smile.

"No mistake about your being from the country, miss! Do I often go to the Tower and Westminster Abbey? I've been to Westminster Abbey once, but to the Tower I never did go."

"You *do* surprise me," said Violet. "Why, the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey have been mixed up with my dreams ever since I was a child."

At this moment there was a noise in the street to which Violet listened intently.

"Oh, that's only Punch and Judy," said Mrs. Carlish, and she rose to close the window. "That confounded thing always comes once a week, and this is their day. I love a barrel-organ, but I do hate a Punch and Judy with their squawk—squawk—squawk. I never give them a copper, and I never will."

"Punch and Judy?" said Violet.

"Is it possible," said Mrs. Carlish, partly to her-

self, "that she never saw Punch and Judy?" Then, turning to Violet, she said, "Why it's a foolish kind of play with puppets. It's wonderful that you have never seen it, and yet how could you, if you've only just come to London?"

"Play!" said Violet. "Oh, I should love to see it."

Violet drew a chair up to the window, peeped out, and saw her first play, while Mrs. Carlish went to attend to some domestic duties.

At once she became a child again, and never since Punch was first invented did he get a more admiring and absorbed spectator than he got in Mrs. Carlish's "parlour floor."

At every whack dealt by Punch at his wife's head her involuntary peals of laughter rang through the room. There was not an intonation of Punch's nasal voice as he spoke to his victim, or to Toby, that did not seem to Violet to issue from the puppet's lips.

Then the money collector, whose crafty eye had caught sight of Violet, came under the window and held out his battered hat. Violet felt in her pockets, and finding no smaller coin than a shilling, took it out, and looked at it rather wistfully, for there were many things it would buy, and then at last threw it out to the man. This resulted in the play being begun again, for a shilling was evidently an unexpected donation. To Violet's embarrassment, the front of the Punch show was now brought straight before the window, especially for her behoof, and she noticed that the opposite windows were thrown up and people were looking, not upon Punch and Judy, but upon her.

Mrs. Carlish now entered and said, "I'm afraid you're attracting too much notice, miss. The neighbours ain't used to seeing a beautiful grow'd up young lady laughing at Punch and Judy like a child. I think you had better shut the window and see Punch and Judy another day."

And to Violet's great regret she pulled down the window and the girl turned away.

Mrs. Carlish then went up to the piano and said, "You do play the pianer, don't you?"

"Yes," said Violet, "I do, but I am somewhat out of practice, for we had but one piano, and that was very much worn."

"This is a beauty o' mine," she said, "and it's paid for, too. I do so love music! I love it better than anything else in the world. And one reason why I let my last lodger run three pounds into debt was because she played on my pianer. And I do miss hearing her play. Would you mind playing me something?"

Violet went to the piano and opened it.

As the music stool was out of order—the screw having become broken—she took a chair and sat down.

"What shall I play?"

"Would you play 'Cheer, boys, Cheer'?"

"I never heard that," said Violet.

"Bless me! You *are* from the country," said the woman. "Can you play 'Good-bye, Daddy'?"

"It's a singular thing," said Violet, laughing, "but I never even heard of that."

"Well, you *are* from the country. I'll try and think of some old tunes that I used to know

when I was a girl. Can you play the ‘Perfect Cure’ ? ”

“ No,” said Violet.

“ Can you play ‘ Wait for the Waggon ’ ? ”

“ No,” said Violet, laughing.

“ Can you play ‘ Woodman, Spare that Tree ’ ? ”

“ Well, there,” said Violet, “ I do remember hearing my aunts play it when I was quite a child, but I am afraid I could not remember it sufficiently even to play it by ear. And I am ashamed to say that I do play a good deal by ear.”

Whereupon the woman began to hum the tune, and then to sing the first bar or two in a rather good contralto voice :

“ Oh, woodman, spare that tree—ee,  
Touch not a single bough ;  
In youth it sheltered me—ee,  
And I’ll protect it now.”

Violet at once played the air as far as the asthmatical piano would let her, to the woman’s intense delight.

“ I do wish you could play ‘ Cheer, boys, Cheer,’ ” she said. “ *I* can play it with one finger.”

Violet at once jumped up and said, “ Pray, play it, Mrs. Carlish.”

The woman went and stood before the key-board and picked out the notes with considerable dexterity, and Violet immediately followed her upon the piano. She got really amused at this, and tried to recall all the simple airs with which she was familiar.

“Can you play ‘Home, Sweet Home’?” said the woman.

“Ah,” said Violet, “there is at last something that I *can* play for you.”

And her mind flew back to Vesprie Towers, and she and Lawrie were listening to the sound of bells coming over the trees as they rang out the favourite Vesprie air. The tears came into her eyes.

The woman looked on with a deeply sympathetic face, and said,

“You are thinking of your own home, miss.” Then her eyes said, “I wonder where it is?”

And so the morning passed very pleasantly for Violet, and when dinner time came and the busy little woman had fetched from the inexhaustible cook-shop round the corner a plate of salt beef and carrots and onions, and pease pudding, Violet felt quite at home and did full justice to the repast.

Late in the afternoon, Mrs. Carlish came into the room, curl-papers removed, and dressed for going out, and told Violet that she was going over Hungerford Bridge into the Strand to do some shopping, and that she would like to take her to the Lowther Arcade. Violet was more than ready for such an expedition, and in a very little while they were crossing Hungerford Bridge.

Mrs. Carlish would have been disappointed if Violet had failed to enjoy the wonderful things in the Lowther Arcade, for it was a favourite resort of her own. She possessed to an intense degree the Cockney woman’s love of life. London to her was the universe; she could conceive nothing outside



London, and somehow the cheap gewgaws and luxuries of the Arcade made her feel, when she was there, that she was in the very centre of the wealth of the world. Yet she was scarcely prepared for Violet's delight at the raree show.

It almost seemed as if the instinctive love of childish things, which had had no opportunity of being exercised in her childhood, began to move within the girl of seventeen, as the sap and latent forces that had been arrested in a tree will move when kissed by a late summer. She lingered over the toys exactly as a child would have done. Everything was new, magical, fairy-like.

But Mrs. Carlish was not content with seeing the wonderful toys—she bought some; she bought a musical dog for the mantel-piece, and a curious kind of piccolo which she tried in the bazaar until the salesman said,

“ I think I should wait until you get home, if I were you, ma'am ! You will enjoy the children playing it all the more if you don't play it yourself now ! ”

This random remark of the toyman's produced an effect which he had not contemplated. The lively little woman's one sorrow in life was that she had no children—for she dearly loved children. But the depression did not last many minutes, and her face was again smiling.

After they left the bazaar, Mrs. Carlish said,

“ Do you like gin and know-you ? ”

“ I don't know what you mean,” said Violet.

“ There ! I thought you didn't,” said the woman, “ It beats everything on earth, gin and

know-you does. It's a mixture of gin and almonds."

"That sounds nice," said Violet, "I'm so fond of almonds."

"Then you must let me treat you to a glass of gin and 'know-you.'"

And she stopped in front of a small liquor-shop in a street running into the northern side of the Strand.

"No, no," said Violet, "I couldn't go in there, I think, not even with you, Mrs. Carlish."

"Oh, do come," said the woman.

"No," said Violet, "I'll stand here and wait for you."

But as she said so she perceived that a well-dressed man, whom she had seen on the other side of the Strand, had crossed over and was now stopping in the street to gaze at her. This made her think that it would be better to go in with Mrs. Carlish than to stand there alone; and so she followed her silently into the little bar. As it chanced that there were no customers in the bar at that moment, Violet did not regret going in there, and she sat down upon the settee while Mrs. Carlish went up to the bar and asked for two glasses of gin and noyau.

When these were given her, she went to Violet with a glass in each hand and offered one of the glasses to Violet.

"I really could not drink it," said Violet. "I really could not. It would make me ill."

"Oh, *do* taste it," said Mrs. Carlish.

Violet took the glass and put it to her lips and sipped. She soon began to cough.

"Impossible," she said, "to drink it! But the flavour is very nice. It's exactly like almonds. Pray take it."

And she held out the glass towards Mrs. Carlish.

Mrs. Carlish took it, and stood before her with a glass in each hand. Then she sipped from each alternately, and said,

"Well, since you *are* so pressing, I suppose I must take 'em both. But I always make it a rule never to take more than a glass at a time, so that I never get anything like drunk. I only get merry."

"Merry," said Violet, "you're always merry."

"Yes," said Mrs. Carlish, "what's the odds if you are but 'appy?"

She then conducted Violet across the Strand to Hungerford Bridge, her face shining with good nature.

"I should like to give you a treat to-morrow night. I have got two orders for the theater."

Perceiving that the word "orders" conveyed no meaning to Violet, she said,

"My old man is a printer, you know, on the newspapers, and he often gets free tickets, and I have got two for to-morrow night."

"The theatre? How delightful!" said Violet.

"I have wanted to go to the theatre all my life."

The woman stopped on the bridge.

"Never been to a theater in your life?" she gasped. "Well, I knew at once that you were from the country. There was a kind of a mow'd grass smell about you. But I did think you must have been to a theater. And yet you're a young

lady," she continued, looking into Violet's face as if discussing some abstract question with her. "I wasn't so much surprised about 'Punch and Judy,' but I thought you must have been to a theater."

When they got into the house she said,

"And now we'll both take our teas. I'll get your tea ready, and then I'll go and get my own, for I do want a cup o' tea."

But the funny little creature had become such a source of amusement to Violet that she did not like to lose her company, and she said,

"Couldn't we take tea together, Mrs. Carlish?"

"Certainly," said the woman, "if you will condescend to take tea with a plain woman like me."

At that moment there came a cry in the street.

"Water-cresses!"

"Ah," said the landlady, "we're in luck's way. There's the water-creese man! O' course you like them."

"Oh, yes," said Violet, "they're delicious."

And again she was back at Vesprie Towers, gathering water-cresses for her breakfast.

When the little woman left her after tea, Violet actually missed her company. The evening wore on, and it got to be beyond Violet's bedtime. The later it got the more active and bustling the little woman became, as Violet could hear by the noise in the house.

After a while, when she heard her landlady in the passage, she opened the door, and under pretence of asking for something she wanted, entered into conversation with the woman, who came into the

room, and once there she did not seem at all eager to leave. At length Violet invited her to sit down, which she did, and at once the flow of her garrulity began.

Whenever Violet moved in her chair as a sign that bed-time had arrived, the woman became more garrulous still.

At last Violet said,

"I suppose the hours of London people are very late."

"Mine are," said the woman.

"When do you generally go to bed?" said Violet.

"Oh, about four o'clock."

"Four o'clock in the morning?" said Violet in amazement.

"Yes," said the woman, "except on one night in the week when my old man comes home earlier, and then I go to bed about eleven o'clock."

"What extraordinary hours!" said Violet. "And do all Londoners behave like this?"

"God bless you, no!" said the woman, "of course not. If they did, how would London be carried on? But, as I told you before, my old man is a printer—a 'comp' on a daily newspaper, and his time for work is in the night-time. When we were first married, I used to try to go to bed at night like other people and get up like other people, but then I never used to see anything of my young man. So now we both turn night into day and day into night, in the manner o' speaking; and rare fun it is to see London in the night hours, *I* can tell you!"

“And must I do the same?” said Violet.

“Certainly not,” said the woman, “why should you? It would be bad for you, I fancy. That bright complexion of yours would soon be as muddy as mine if nothing but gaslight fell on it. So you had better go to bed at once. I am going into the New Cut, shopping.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t go to sleep. I seem last night to have done all the sleeping I shall want for forty-eight hours. I couldn’t possibly go to sleep. Let me go with you.”

The woman readily agreed, and they sallied out together. As they were walking towards the New Cut, Violet remarked that London did not look quite so lively at night as Mrs. Carlish had led her to expect.

“Wait till you get into the Cut,” said she; “you’ll find it lively enough then.”

When they turned into the New Cut, Violet no longer thought that London was less noisy in the night than Mrs. Carlish had described it to be. The flaring of the gas-jets inside and outside the shops, the raving of the costermongers at the stalls proclaiming their wares, the movement of the loiterers on the pavement and in the middle of the street, made Violet feel that Bedlam had been let loose. It turned her quite dizzy, but still, such was the exhilarating effect of life surging round her, that her cheek flushed, her eyes flashed and her blood tingled in the tips of her fingers.

“Now we’ll have a turn over Waterloo Bridge,” said Mrs. Carlish, “and see people come out of the theaters—I’m very fond o’ doing that—and then

we'll go west and see the swells coming out o' the clubs and the ladies driving in their carriages from parties and balls."

On the next day Mrs. Carlish seemed to be so busy that she had little time to gossip with Violet, but when she brought in the frugal dinner that Violet asked for, a dish of the plain fare from the inexhaustible cook-shop, she said,

"I daresay you haven't forgotten about the theater to-night."

As they were walking over Waterloo Bridge, it is doubtful if Violet's enthusiasm at going to the theatre for the first time was greater than Mrs. Carlish's enthusiasm at going for the thousandth time.

"There'll be a crush at the pit door, my dear," she remarked when approaching the theatre, "and when you get to the door-post it's dangerous sometimes, you get so squeezed. But we won't try to get in among the first. I don't care for the front row of the pit myself, and I can't imagine why people do rush and crowd to get to the front row of the pit."

At the theatre Mrs. Carlish's interest in the piece was a good deal disturbed by watching Violet's absorption in it. At the humorous parts there came the ringing laugh that had amazed the woman at the "Punch and Judy" show, and at the pathetic parts the tears would roll down her cheeks until the landlady put her hand into Violet's pocket and took out her handkerchief and wiped them off. This went on through the entire piece.



The next day, after dinner, Violet went out alone, and in the direction of Hyde Park.

Delightful as had Violet's walk been on the previous occasions with the landlady, her enjoyment had been nothing compared with the pleasure she now felt, in which there was an indefinable sense of responsibility, and almost of daring. She was alone, swimming, tossed, as it were, in the great ocean of London life.

When she reached Hyde Park, she turned by instinct to the Drive, and then to Rotten Row, and her exhilaration was such that it seemed as though quicksilver had been injected into her veins.

This was the famous Drive and this was the famous Rotten Row of which her father and mother had talked to her. It was here that the high life of London was moving. Those equipages were filled with members of the great families of England—those families which, scarcely more than fifty years ago, she had been told, had been in touch with the Vespries.

She took one of the chairs and looked on, as though in a dream. Life was indeed wonderful and rich beyond words.

As she sat there in the park, enjoying the panorama, the thoughts kept coming to her, "The ancestors of scores of these people moving about with these equipages must have known mine, and must have visited Vesprie Towers when it was in its glory. How delightful it would be if some elderly lady, looking idly around her, should cast her eye upon me in this chair and think to herself, 'How very like *she* is to Miss Vesprie of the Towers, whom

I knew when I was a girl!’ and how delightful it would be if she were to step out of her carriage and step up to me, and say, ‘My dear, is your name Vesprie?’ and then take me to a palace to dinner where she would give me a beautiful dress, where I should meet ladies of high rank and perhaps members of the royal family!” But when she got as far as this, she realized the absurdities of her own fancies, and she began to laugh.

A man stood before her and asked her for payment for her chair.

“How much?” said Violet.

“A penny, please, miss,” said the man.

“A penny—only a penny to see this incomparable pageant!” she thought, as she gave the man the coin.

When her eyes had at last become thoroughly satiated and dazed with the amazing pageantry of the Row, she turned away and walked across the park, and retraced her steps towards her dingy lodgings in Lambeth.

## CHAPTER III

### THE STRATFORD SLASHER.

AN incident now occurred that turned Violet's thoughts into a new and bewildering channel, subsequently changing the whole course of her life. One morning Mrs. Carlish came into her room in a state of suppressed excitement.

"I've often said to Mr. Carlish how much I'd like to see the famous fair at Stratford, and he has given me a bit of extra housekeeping money and has told me to go down to Stratford for the day and take you along o' me. He's found out all about it. There's a cheap excursion to Stratford on the day of the fair."

"Oh, I'd love to see Stratford-on-Avon! That would delight me more than anything. I know many of Shakespeare's plays almost by heart, as I've often told you."

"I thought it would please you, my dear. Why, it must be as glorious as Bartholomew's Fair, from all Mr. Carlish, who's been there more than once, has many o' times told me."

A week later, they started on their excursion, and reached Stratford soon after midday.

A stranger picture than that which met Violet's eyes, when she and Mrs. Carlish left the station and made their way into the streets of Shakespeare's town, could hardly be imagined.

The pleasure boats and canoes on the river attracted Violet more than any other sight, but Mrs. Carlish's taste showed itself most forcibly in one of the streets where oxen were being roasted in the open air, and being, moreover, devoured by the hungry crowd. It appealed strongly to this lively woman's sense of humour.

The din was becoming somewhat intolerable to Violet in this part of the town, and she had just proposed to Mrs. Carlish that they should pay a visit to the church, where the sounds would be softened for a while, when suddenly a great commotion struck upon their ears, and presently there came in view a man standing up in a carriage with four horses bedizened with white favours. And he seemed to be throwing something, apparently coppers, while the people near him were leaving everything else to scramble for them.

From the place where Mrs. Carlish and Violet stood, under the shadows of the church limes, the motley picture could be easily seen, while they were in a great degree hidden from observers.

Mrs. Carlish was about to ask a bystander what the noise meant, when some one within earshot cried out excitedly—

“They're sovereigns! He's throwing sovereigns about. It's Jerry Redwood, the Stratford Slasher—the prize-fighter what went to 'Straly and have made a gigantic fortune, partly by gold-digging and partly by buying land. He's just come back with his pockets stuffed full o' 'Stralian gold, and he is throwing the guineas about like farthings! He's

hired a carriage and pair with postillions at the Red Horse Hotel, with ribbons like a wedding."

"A rum go," said a girl. "But do you believe, though, in the Slasher's money?"

"Yes, he's made his pile fast enough. But I think he's off his nut. He looks as much of a drinking man as ever, and I reckon this must be all delirium tremens. A sensible man of money don't play the fool like that!"

Several of the Stratford townspeople now came up in great excitement at the knowledge that money was being thrown about.

"What do you think I saw him do a little while ago?" said one. "He finished a kind of drunken speech about the way in which he had made his money by pulling out a five-pound note, putting it between two slices of bread and butter, and eating it with one of the hot sausages they were cooking yonder."

Some in the crowd were struck silent by such revelations of money squandering; but the effect upon Mrs. Carlish was quite startling. She broke into an hysterical laugh and pressed Violet's hand tightly in her own.

At this moment the man threw some gold into the great dripping-pan under the roasting rother. And what a rush there was then to get the sovereigns out of the gravy! And then the man, with a loud, uproarious laugh, said,

"Stratford folk stirring up the rother's gravy to find the Stratford Slasher's sovereigns!"

"Look," called out an excited bystander, "they are actually pulling the postboys from the horses

and unyoking the horses from the carriage ; and now they are dragging the carriage themselves towards this way. That's the Stratford band," he continued as the music struck up. "The Slasher has hired it to march in front of the procession and play 'Sec, the Conquering Hero Comes !' "

Several of the people standing round made a rush towards the procession.

"Stop here, my dear," said Mrs. Carlish, still clutching Violet's hand, "he's coming towards the church ; this is the best place—yes, that's what we'll do, stop here." .

"No, no !" said Violet. "Come away—do come away !"

But Mrs. Carlish did not hear the appeal, for the noise of the cracked band drew nearer—a noise harsh and discordant—and drowned Violet's voice. As the strange spectacle came towards the church, Violet could distinguish the man more plainly. He was about sixty years of age, a colossal, navvy-like looking fellow, whose great ruddy face, though shining as if lubricated by alcohol, showed that he must at one time have been strikingly handsome. In the corner of his mouth was a cigar of enormous size. On the seat beside him were a tumbler and a bottle of ale, and at the bottom of the carriage there were several bottles. When the carriage stopped, he put his hand in his pocket, and taking out a handful of sovereigns, tossed them into the street.

"That's it—scramble for 'em, Stratford folk," he cried out, in a hoarse contemptuous tone. "Scramble for 'em !"

This proceeding, however, arrested the progress

of the carriage, for the men who were dragging it immediately left it and joined in the scramble.

"Come back!" cried the Slasher. "Let the others have a chance! If you don't come back at once, not another darned quid shall you get from me! That's the way," he continued, "that's the way!—But where's my boy?"

Suddenly he caught sight of a tall, handsome young fellow in the crowd. He was coming towards the carriage, a look of intense anger upon his flushed face.

"Why, what the blazes does this mean?" said the Slasher. "Glad to see me I thought you'd be, but I never thought you'd be so upset as this! Why, he's the model of the Stratford Slasher what used to be, and the Bendigo millionaire as is! All the time I was making my pile I was sayin' to m'self, 'You've got a millionaire for a father. I'll soon be coming home, my boy, and we'll let bygones be bygones.'"

The young man stood silent, with clenched fists. Suddenly he turned deadly pale. He had caught sight of Violet in the crowd.

The moment their eyes met she knew him. It was Martin Redwood, Lawrie's friend. In an instant memories of the osier feast flashed across her mind, and the whole scene rose up vividly before her. The mother's angry utterances, her revelations concerning Martin's guardianship in the old days while she was living alone in the home of her ancestors at Vesprie Towers, every word that the woman had spoken, came rushing back upon her recollection. "He has been giving all his life to



you without your knowing it . . . Who was it used to light your fire in the morning and clean your shoes ? . . . He never slept in the cottage . . . he would go creeping up to the great house and sleep in the kitchen, just to protect you ! . . . and now you are too proud to follow the game . . .”

Then came the recollection of how she had taken up the osier rod and had stepped towards him, and how she had rested her hand upon his hair and kissed him on the forehead. Then, stranger still, she recalled her own unspoken words, “ The eyes are the same that came to me in my dream . . . the Vesprie luck ! ”

“ Come up to the chay, my boy—come up to the chay.” And the Slasher began to throw some more sovereigns out. “ There they go—that’s the way to do it ! Money ain’t no object to Jerry Redwood, the Stratford Slasher as was, and the Bendigo millionaire as is ! Stratford folk ! ” he continued in the same contemptuous tone, “ this is a good sight for the Stratford Slasher’s eyes ! This is the sight that I see’d, in thought like, many a time when I wur at the diggin’s—ay, many a time.”

And he then threw out some more sovereigns, and there was another scramble.

“ When I wur a-makin’ my pile, I wur sayin’ to mysel’ every day an’ a’most every hour, ‘ I always knows I can work when I’ve got anything to work for, and now I’ll work like a ’oss, now the chance has come to me o’ makin’ my pile ! An’ I’ll go to Stratford, where I wur born, and I’ll throw the quids among ’em, an’ I’ll eat sandwiches o’ five-

pun notes, an' I'll make Stratford folk duck an' bow to me'—an' I've done it! Martin, my boy, why the blazes don't you come up to the chay?"

But the Slasher's day-dream in Australia proved somewhat different from what he anticipated. His son was staring at the yellow flash of the sovereigns in the sunlight with horror and loathing. He looked at that moment as though he had the greatest difficulty in restraining himself from springing at the man's throat and strangling him. His face clearly showed that in his sight his father was far more unwelcome seated there, mad with drink, throwing away his gold, than he would have been had he returned to England a pauper.

The Slasher glared at his son in blank amazement. With intelligence enough to realize the omnipotence of wealth, he had fully expected that his son would leap upon him with joy at the idea of sharing his riches.

The Slasher now got down from the carriage and went up to the boy.

"Who are you a-scowlin' at? Do you know you're the son o' the man as could buy up old Stratford ten times over—yis, all the lot! Yis, and buy up Vesprie Towers and Vesprie Park and Vesprie lands what you was allus a-talking about—Yis, every blarm'd acre! Yis, that's what *I* could do! When I was a-buildin' up my pile, I says to m'self many's the time, 'I'll go back to Stratford, and I'll buy up all that's worth buying, and I'll take it away to 'Straly. I'll buy the house where Shakespeare wur born, and I'll take it away, brick for brick and beam for beam, and I'll build it up on my

estate at Sydney, and I'll run a Shakespeare show. And I'll buy up all the Shakespeare relicks. I'm afraid I can't buy the church,' sez I, 'but I may p'haps be able to buy Shakespeare's image.'"

When the man mentioned the Vesprie lands, Violet, who had overheard every word, began to tremble violently, and a look of wild excitement came into her face.

"Come away! I can't bear it—come away!"

Mrs. Carlish, although understanding nothing of all Violet's extraordinary emotion, saw that the scene that surrounded this mad drunkard was becoming serious. She grew alarmed, and led Violet hastily away towards another part of the town, where the more pleasing sound of laughter and the barking of sheep-dogs as they approached the cattle and sheep fair was mingled with the distant thumping of the drums, and the clang of the cymbals, from the brass band of the menagerie at the pleasure fair. For each fair was divided off from the others into separate patches of bustling activity. Circuses, menageries, theatres, merry-go-rounds, dancing booths and boxing booths could all be seen in their various movements and colour.

They passed through the sheep fair with some difficulty. But when they reached the cattle fair, where the bullocks were yoked to a long line of poles, there was no getting through it at all, and they were obliged to skirt round it. It was not, however, until they reached the horse fair that Violet began to show any interest in what was going on. She seemed like one in a trance. But the sight of the horses being trotted and galloped up

and down between two rows of horse-dealers, grooms, and farmers brought back to mind her childhood and a day with her father and Lawrie at Thornton fair.

When they reached the cheese and onion fair, with great piles of cheeses ranged one on the top of another, until they looked like fragments of classical stone columns, and the strings of onions gleaming like vast ropes of pearls in the sunshine, Mrs. Carlish said,

“ That’s a putty sight, my dear. That’s a picture that ’ud be hard to beat ! Ain’t it, now ? ”

But all these were nothing in Mrs. Carlish's eyes compared with the pleasure fair, where great masses of people, mostly from the surrounding villages, were bustling in and out of the great tent in which circus-riders were performing, or standing in dense masses before Wombwell's menagerie, and staring up in open-mouth wonderment at the vast pictures of leopards leaping through hoops, lions cowering beneath the whip of the lion-tamer, giraffes feeding upon palm trees, performing elephants, etc., or else watching the dancing of the strolling actors, who had come out on the exterior stage between the performances—pirates, buccaneers, kilted Scottish kings, and clowns—dancing and singing :

“ In this farmyard, in this farmyard,  
The donkey twirls his tail,  
Hee-haw—hee-haw, chuckerbuck,  
Chuckerbuck too,  
Cock-a-doodle, cock-a-doodle,  
Cock-a-doodle-doo ! ”

“ Ah, I know that old song,” said Mrs. Carlish, and she began to hum it under her breath.

So interested was Mrs. Carlish in all that was going on around her that it was some time before she took serious notice of Violet’s altered appearance and manner.

“ Why, my dear, how bad you look ! Are you ill ? ”

“ I’m very tired,” said Violet in a faint voice. “ Shall we go home now ? ”

The good-natured woman at once assented, and they soon reached the railway station ; and presently to Violet’s relief they were starting on their return journey to London. Mrs. Carlish talked volubly all the way home about the fair, but scarcely a word in response fell from Violet. She seemed lost in thought.

## CHAPTER IV

### A STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE

So exciting were the glories of London, and so inexperienced was Violet in the outlay of money in town lodgings, that she failed to keep that strict watch on her purse which she had always done at Vesprie Towers.

At first Mrs. Carlish evidently thought that she had found a treasure in a young lady with unlimited supplies of hard cash, and for a time she gave Violet no hint as to economising ; but when Violet's little store melted down to thirty-five shillings, the quick-eyed little woman began to see that her lodger was beginning to feel uncomfortable about something. Serious reflections, indeed, had come to Violet as to ways and means.

"Seems to me," the woman thought to herself, "that there's a look in the dear young thing's face, that always comes when the oof's a bit low. I should like to speak to her about it, but I'm afraid to do so. I should like to say to her, 'Excuse me, my dear, but for the last few days I have noticed from your face that funds are getting short. I don't suppose there is any thing *I* can do to put you in the way of earning money. But if there is, you know, say the word.' "

Violet's experience of Mrs. Carlish was that she

was a good-natured, careless, happy-go-lucky, Cockney woman of a type that in England is only seen in London, and at last she confided in her as to her impecuniosity and fears of the future.

"Well, I was beginning to think that it was so, my dear. But never say die! I've often had as bad a look-out as anybody. Still, though I'm no chicken, I've never wanted a meal in my life. I've generally managed to get a good dinner at the eating-house and a noggin o' gin and 'know-you' on the top of it. Of course, yours'll be a tougher game than mine, 'cos you're a lady."

"Why is that?" said Violet.

"It's all very well to be a lady when your pocket's full, but it's a very different game when it's empty. Lady-like looks and lady-like ways is sadly against you *then*. I was reading, only the other day, what the *Family Herald* said in its wisdom column upon this very same thing, and I left it in the room with the corner turned down, thinking you might like to take and read it."

And she took up the soiled, greasy periodical and handed it to Violet. It was a short extract from a book that once had a vogue and now is forgotten—Sir Arthur Helps' essays.

"Vulgarity is as good as an income. For see what advantages a vulgar man has. He can push his fortunes without even knowing that he is pushing them. He can ask and refuse, and haggle and barter, and do any disagreeable or dirty work, without exhausting himself by it. In dealing with the world, he is in his true element. He flatters heartily, without knowing that his flattery is an



impertinence. For himself he can swallow praise like a pig its provender; and no want of refinement prevents him from enjoying the coarsest entertainment.

“Parents who care for the material success and for the rude happiness of their children should pray that they may be sufficiently vulgar, and should always give them a good example in that respect.”

While Violet was reading these words, which applied so terribly to her own condition, Mrs. Carlish was called away by a tradesman’s boy at the door, and this gave Violet an opportunity of thinking over the good woman’s words.

Violet naturally thought of what, in most cases, is the first thought of women in those circumstances. She bethought herself of the needle, and when Mrs. Carlish returned she consulted her.

“My dear young lady,” said Mrs. Carlish, “have you any idea what getting a living by the needle means?”

“Not the slightest,” said Violet, “but I have been taught plain needlework, and I am sure my eyes are so strong and my health is so good that I could do as much work as another woman.”

“Yes, but the pay!” said Mrs. Carlish. “The pay! You’re not the first lady I’ve known that has been hard-up. And I have noticed that the reason why hard-up-ness is worse for them than for folks that are born hard-up is just this—that they find it a stiff job to learn the valy o’ coppers. To them as arn’t born hard-up a penny don’t seem to ha’ got any clear meanin’—they’ve been used to think

in silver instead o' copper. A penny is a kind of a counter, and six of 'em can be changed into a pretty little coin which we call sixpence, a pretty little thing that will buy things, and two of these sixpences can be changed into a shilling, and this'll buy more things. Now a person that's born hard-up and thinks in coppers can make a shilling go twice as far as one as thinks in silver."

Violet smiled as she said,

"But I was born in the state that you call hard-up-ness, and although I belong to a great family, and have always lived in a great house belonging to my family, a penny has always meant to me what it is to those who were born in a state of hard-up-ness, and I have always known well what a penny will buy."

Mrs. Carlish now told Violet what a needlewoman could earn a day, even supposing it were possible to get work.

"Horrible!" said Violet. "It is this very knowledge of mine of the value of coppers that begins to frighten me. It seems to me like a bad dream. Surely the ladies that one sees driving about so richly clad would find their clothes burn their skin like the shirt of Nessus if they realized that needlewomen are paid like this!"

Violet then took the little woman still further into her confidence, and told her of the struggle with genteel poverty of which she knew so much.

"My dear," said Mrs. Carlish, "your experience has made you different from other ladies of your rank. I'm afraid that any one of us would be made as selfish by being rich as any one of the ladies that

wear on their backs the dresses made by poor needlewomen."

A day or two later, Mrs. Carlish rapped at the parlour door. On entering the room, the way in which she took a chair indicated that she had something important to communicate to Violet.

"I've been thinking a good deal," said she, "over what we talked about the other day, and I spoke about you to a friend of mine. She is the wife of a 'super' at Drury Lane. She was once a lady herself—at least she was a lady's maid who knows a good deal of the world, and she told me of something that she thinks would suit you down to the ground."

"Oh, I wonder what it is?" said Violet, all excitement. "Do make haste and tell me what it is. What a true friend you are, to be sure!"

"Well, when she was first married she was as fine a young woman as you'd see in London, and she'd see'd a lot o' ladies and noticed their ways in everything. And when the London season was on she used to make a respectable lot o' money out o' the West-end shops by having shawls and things tried on her."

Violet's countenance fell.

"I could not do it," she said, "I really could not! I would rather become a slave of the needle, or perform the most menial offices, provided that my degradation were not advertised and exposed to the public gaze; but to stand in a London shop, to have shawls and mantles thrown over my shoulders for the inspection of vulgar people . . ."

"But you don't mean that all well-to-do people are vulgar?" said Mrs. Carlish.

"I have nearly come to think so," said poor Violet, mournfully, "I really could not do it."

"It would not be in a shop—leastways not exactly in a shop," said the landlady. "It would be in a kind of private room, a sale-room, upon a different floor from the shop. When a very expensive shawl—a tip-topper—is to be sold, you would be called from another room and told to try it on."

"And for what reason?" said Violet. "Why should it be thrown over my shoulders rather than over the shoulders of another shop-girl, Mrs. Carlish? For a shop-girl I should be, of course."

Mrs. Carlish smiled.

"My dear," said she, "you will make me speak plainly to you, though you may think me rude. It's your fine figure."

"Oh, please don't talk about my figure," said Violet.

"Why not? You ought to be proud of it! Anyhow, it's worth something to you. 'Sides," she said suddenly, "beggars cannot be choosers. I can see no other way!"

The result of the conversation was that Violet agreed to the landlady's idea, and it was arranged that the "super's" wife should go to the shop-manager and speak to him on the subject of engaging Violet at the large West-end establishment. But when the landlady had left her, Violet's fortitude gave way, and she buried her face in her hands and began to sob as though her heart would break.

And so it came about that Violet obtained a place at the Costume Establishment through the influence of Mrs. Carlish's friend.

At the end of the season, Violet was told that, in spite of her superb figure, the principal of the West-end shop had decided that she would not be required any longer.

Violet fully understood why this was ; she had been quite unable to succumb to the insolence of the vulgar *nouveaux riches* who patronized the place.

Mrs. Carlish's ingenuity was, in consequence, again called into requisition, and it was not long before that busy brain of hers devised something else.

One morning she came into Violet's room and said,

"Well, I've done it for you. I've got you a place as book-folder. The pay isn't big, but if you have now learnt to think in coppers, you'll be able to keep body and soul together with it."

"How much is it ?" said Violet.

"Fifteen shillings a week."

"Fifteen shillings a week !" said poor Violet, aghast, "why that will do very little more than pay my rent."

"Why, you don't suppose you can keep on these rooms, my dear, do you ?" said the landlady. "All you can afford is the third floor back. And then, I believe, you'll have to do without a fire, except in the very coldest weather."

And so Violet began to live anew as a book-folder. The kind of girl that she was now brought into contact with was of the class called factory girl, who turned from one occupation to another as business fluctuated.

But presently a severe blow came upon Violet. Owing to Mrs. Carlish's husband having lost his situation on the daily paper, and owing to his having to go on a Manchester paper, she had to leave London and live in Manchester. This was a very great loss to Violet, for she had become quite attached to the good-natured little vulgarian.

And as to the poor little woman herself, her grief at leaving London made her quite ill. To be torn by the roots from the London soil and planted elsewhere was unthinkable.

"I would ask you to come with us," she said to Violet, with tears in her eyes, "for there must be as good an opening for you there as in London, but I feel that I am not going there to stay. I am certain I should pine away there, and my old man says he will soon be able to get another post on a London paper."

For a time, after the departure of Mrs. Carlish, Violet was able to occupy the "third floor back" of the new tenant of the house, and she got several letters from her old friend full of wailings about her "transportation," as she called it, and full of kindness to her late lodger, always concluding with the fervent hope of getting back to London.

These letters were as garrulous as her talk, but not without a certain kind of practical wisdom.

For two years Violet led a wretched hand-to-mouth existence. And, of course, day by day matters grew worse with her, and day by day her poor clothes grew poorer, for she had but scant means of renewing them.



It may not be easy for the reader to realize fully the disastrous effects of this growing shabbiness of dress upon Violet's fortunes, and also upon her own mind.

De Quincey says that the most absolutely helpless creature moving about in the streets of London is an educated gentleman without a farthing in his pocket. There is nothing that such a man can turn his hand to. Such potentialities as a bread-winner that may be latent within him are stifled and killed by a perfect impecuniosity. His very education and accomplishments are in the way.

But if these words are true of a penniless gentleman, what is to be said of a delicate-minded, high-born and educated girl with only a few shillings in her pocket, and without a friend to recommend her? Every door she passes in the street is an iron gate shutting her away from the comforts and amenities of life.

Violet was very clever in a hundred ways, and there were many things she could have done that would have brought her as much earnings as she required. She would have made a good amanuensis, she could have taught English and French and music, if she had only been in a position from which she could approach the well-to-do world. But situated as she was it was impossible to get near to that world; she was drifting away from it, and even an attic in Lambeth grew to be a luxury she could no longer afford.



## CHAPTER V

### LIFE IN BRICK ALLEY

ANOTHER year went by. Violet Vesprie was now reduced to living in a squalid place called Brick Alley.

Brick Court would have been a more appropriate name, for it was a squalid square court of considerable size—so large, indeed, that the sunshine did really at times find its way there. The doors of all the tenements were wide open and apparently fastened back, a fact which showed that each tenement was let out, either in floors or in single rooms. When the sun did pierce into the court, there was generally a slatternly woman squatting at the doors and children squatting round her. Across each of the four corners of the court, clothes-lines were hung, from which dingy linen dangled.

Squalid as the place was, the dirty children seemed to get considerable pleasure out of their qucer lives. They seemed, indeed, to get more enjoyment out of their home-made dolls, fashioned from all sorts of things—sometimes a little bundle of rags, sometimes an old slipper, sometimes merely a piece of wood with a piece of rag wrapped round it—than Violet used to get in her childish days out of her wax doll with its movable blue eyes. And the excitement of the little owner with the carriage

made of a broken old soap-box, and the little dinner parties of mud pies, served up on fragments of broken plates, was quite as great as the excitement evinced at any Christmas-tree party in Belgravia.

It was the genuine simple interest that Violet showed as she lingered to watch these children at their play, coupled no doubt with her superb beauty and figure, that made the women of the court take to her and shield her from the rough ways of the men.

On one occasion a dirty slovenly woman of terrible drinking habits made a furious attack upon a young fellow who spoke a saucy word to Violet as she was stepping through the children to go to her room. Her beauty, indeed, now proved a frequent source of distress.

No one knew Violet's name or sought to know it. Nothing, indeed, is more remarkable than the manner in which people fall into the way of life in any sort of environment in which they may be thrown. The tenements in Brick Alley were mainly occupied by factory girls, flower girls, coster girls, and street waifs, scarcely any one of whom had any knowledge of the antecedents of their fellows, nor did they exhibit the faintest curiosity as to those antecedents. As to the unmarried girls, many of them seemed to have no surnames at all, for they were always called by their Christian names—Susie, Jessie, or Bessie, as the case might be.

## CHAPTER VI

### A TIMELY ENCOUNTER

WHILE still living in that "third floor back" in the Lambeth lodging-house, Violet had received a letter from Mrs. Carlish announcing that it was not unlikely that she and her "old man" would soon be again in London.

This had been welcome news for Violet, and when the stress of poverty had forced her to leave her Lambeth lodging, she had asked the landlady to take in any letters that might come for her and keep them until she called for them. For she had by this time learnt how the destinies of the poor are governed by the chapter of accidents, and knowing Mrs. Carlish's erratic ways, and knowing, besides, how difficult it might be for her to live in the same lodgings for any length of time, she had taken the precaution to write to Mrs. Carlish and say that from this day forward she would go at ten o'clock on every Wednesday evening to the corner of Burleigh Street, Strand, with the hope of meeting her there sooner or later.

Mrs. Carlish promptly replied, promising to go to the appointed place on the first Wednesday of her return to London. But although Violet went on Wednesday night after Wednesday night to the place of rendezvous, no Mrs. Carlish made her appearance. She would often stand there for an

hour at a time ; still no Mrs. Carlish. At last she wrote to Manchester, and instead of receiving an answer, she had her letter returned through the Dead Letter office.

"She is in London then," Violet thought, "and she will certainly go to the appointed place, and I must never miss a Wednesday night now."

She had made no friends since she lost Mrs. Carlish, and her desire to see her old friend increased daily. Every Wednesday night, therefore, wet or fine, Violet went to Burleigh Street without fail, sustained by the forlorn hope that she might see among the passers-by the cheerful face of Mrs. Carlish.

One Wednesday night, while she was waiting there, she became conscious that another girl had come near her and was standing by her side.

Something in the girl's face struck Violet. She could not have said what it was, but the more she looked at the face the more it interested her.

At this moment, a somewhat elderly woman, accompanied by a young girl, came up also and stood at this corner. The woman's face was as repugnant to Violet as the face of the girl she had been watching was attractive ; and she was somewhat shocked to see the woman go up to her and address her as an acquaintance.

Touching the girl on the shoulder the woman said, "Now, my dear, why don't you come along 'er us. You know very well that you ain't got no home to go to, and I'll find a nice comfortable one for you."

"Leave me alone," said the girl. "I told you

before that I wouldn't go with you. I know what *you* want. I've seen you a-talking to other girls. Leave me alone."

Then the old woman called up the second girl whom she had brought with her, and immediately changed her voice to an angry bullying tone.

"You shall come," said she, "You know you owe me a lot of money. You owe me for the things you are wearing, you do! Don't she, Sal?"

"Yes," said Sal, but with an impudent devil-may-care look on her face that showed she was lying.

Then, turning to the trembling girl, she added, "Come along. Don't be a fool. There's a nice supper for both of us, and a good bed in the bargain!"

The woman now gripped the girl roughly by the arm, who wrenched herself away in evident terror.

The woman and her companion then again advanced towards the girl, and would no doubt have again seized her by the arm, but Violet stepped between them and said, "Let the girl alone. You shall not touch her. She is evidently ill. Let her alone!"

It was not so much Violet's commanding figure and dauntless bearing that cowed the two as the authoritative ring in her voice. The instinct of class within them acknowledged that voice, and they stopped and gazed at her. Turning to the girl, Violet said, "It is not true that you owe this woman money, is it?"

"No, no! Of course I don't! I don't even know where they live. I don't know nothing about them."

At this moment a policeman came up, much to the dismay of the woman and her accomplice.

"Now, old she-devil," said he, "I ought to run you in, I did, and I've half a mind to do it, too."

"I've done nothing," said the woman, with a scared look.

"Be off, then, unless you want another six months hard! What are you a-waiting here for?" said the policeman, looking round suddenly at Violet.

"I was trying to protect this poor girl against those bad women."

"All right, miss," and with a satisfied nod he turned away and strolled down the Strand.

"Where do you live?" said Violet, addressing the girl, who still lingered near her.

"Nowhere."

"Then where are you going?"

"I knows of a court off Drury Lane, where flower-girls live. The house doors is always on the latch. I'm going to creep in at one of them and sleep on the stairs. I've done it afore, many's the time."

Violet gave her a few coppers, and the girl, gazing into Violet's face with a look of speechless gratitude, hurried away.

While Violet was still speaking to the girl, two young men who had just come out of the Lyceum Theatre strolled by, glancing about them down the Strand for a hansom cab. One of them was a tall, well-set-up, dark-eyed young fellow, with a small black moustache. His companion was somewhat shorter, with a close-shaven face and refined features

"By Jove, look there, look at that superb girl!"

said the tall man, glancing round over his friend's shoulder. "Did you ever see anything so lovely? What a confounded pity it seems to see such a girl as that out here."

"She certainly *is* a beauty!" said the shorter man. "She beats 'em all, you know!"

The two then walked up to Violet, and the taller man's eyes became fixed on Violet's face, as if fascinated. Some sudden deep movement seemed to be going on within him, as could be seen by the colour leaving his cheeks.

"Arthur," said he to the other one, "that is the most glorious creature I ever saw in my life. By Jove! What a pity, though! But I must speak to her——"

"No, no! Don't be a fool. Come along. There's an empty cab over there, just pulled up at the corner."

Violet, who had been waiting for a break in the crowd of vehicles to cross the road, now seized a chance.

"I'm going to follow her," said the taller man. And he stepped across the road, in spite of his friend's dissent.

The shorter man, with a reluctant step, went after him. They easily overtook Violet, for on reaching the other side of the pavement, she stopped and looked back for an omnibus, quite unaware that she was being followed.

"That was a very kind act of yours," said the taller man, reaching Violet's side. "You have been a real kind friend to that poor girl, I'm sure."

Violet's mind was so filled with the incident that



she did not seem to notice being accosted by a stranger, and she answered the man with entire frankness.

"Poor thing," she said, "she seemed to me very ill. I'm sorry now that I did not ask her to come home with me and stay the night."

"And where may your home be?" said the man in a tone of voice that could not be mistaken, even by so unsuspicious and innocent-minded a girl as Violet.

She turned sharply round and looked into the young fellow's face, with a flash of anger in her eyes, and then walked away without a word down a side street, quickening her step.

"What a stunner!" said he, turning towards his friend who had by this time overtaken him. "By Jove! did you notice her voice? It had the accent of a lady. I wonder what she was before she turned to this."

"Don't follow her," said the other. "You seem to have quite lost your head, you fool; don't follow her."

The man, however, stepped out briskly, and overtaking her, placed his hand upon her shoulder. "You're a noble girl," he muttered, bending close to her ear, "won't you give me your address?"

Violet started as though she had been stung by a snake, and grew deadly pale. She again turned round and faced the man, her fist clenched as if with the thought to strike him.

Of a sudden, as if he had sprung up out of the ground, a powerfully built man in sailor's garb grasped Violet's persecutor by the shoulder with an iron grip that made the fellow wince.

"You cur!" said he in a low voice, choked with passion. "How dare you? You cowardly hound!"

"Hands off!" said the young fellow, shaking himself free from the sailor's clutch, "and take that!"

And he struck a fierce blow at the other's face.

But he quickly discovered, skilful boxer though he seemed to be, that he had met with more than his match. A well-directed blow on the sailor's part staggered the man, and he would have dropped like a stricken ox had not his friend caught him as he reeled backward, his face covered with blood. A ring of spectators had already gathered round.

"What's up?" said a policeman, edging his way through the crowd.

"It's nothing," said the shorter of the two men, drawing the policeman aside and giving him his card. "My friend stumbled and has cut his face. It's nothing at all, constable."

"All right," said the policeman, saluting him as he glanced at the card which the young fellow slipped, with a gold piece, into his hand. "All right, m' lord. A little mistake o' mine. I'll call a hansom. Your friend looks a bit queer."

And he turned away, in search of a cab. Meanwhile, Violet, scarcely pausing to witness the result of the conflict, escaped from the crowd and hurriedly reached the Strand. There was an omnibus passing at the moment. She sprang into it, and finding a corner seat vacant at the further end, settled down, half-dazed and trembling with agitation.

When she had in a measure recovered from the

nervous shock that the distressful incident had caused her, she suddenly recalled to mind the face of the sailor who had come with such timeliness to her aid.

It was the face of Martin Redwood !

She half-rose, with an impulsive thought to hasten back and thank him. But a natural fear of any possible sequel to that repugnant episode made her tremble anew and sink down again with a shrinking sense of dread.

For days Violet was haunted by thoughts of Martin Redwood. That episode in the Strand, and then the episode at Stratford Fair, recurred to her again and again, bringing vividly to mind other episodes ; that discovery of Martin's watchfulness over her in her solitary life at Vesprie Towers, and that dream of the Vesprie luck on the night before starting for London. Was Martin Redwood, by any remote chance, still acting as her self-constituted guardian during her far greater loneliness in the midst of the crowded highways and byways of this perilous life in this great city ? That must surely be impossible ! And yet the coincidence of these encounters with the man who had been Lawrie's chosen friend in boyhood caused her to think more about that companionship with her brother than she had ever done. Incidents in Lawrie's life in connection with Martin Redwood that had seemingly been wiped out of her memory began to crowd in upon her thoughts.

Violet's frank admission of indifference in the past in regard to every detail related to her by

Lawrie about his friend Martin—an indifference that had so often vexed her brother—had now changed to a feeling of excessive interest. She recalled to mind events in Martin's life from his early childhood that Lawrie had told her which had been until to-night completely erased from her memory. She had only thought of him hitherto as the son of the prize-fighter, the notorious "Stratford Slasher." But Martin Redwood now rose up in her recollection surrounded by a certain newly-awakened halo of romance. She recalled to mind how, according to Lawrie, he had been educated at the Free Grammar School at Stratford-on-Avon—Shakespeare's school—and how her brother had said, "Martin's been better taught, Violet, far better taught, than you or I. He's a scholar. He gives all his spare moments to a study of great writers, and Shakespeare is his favourite poet, too, as he is your own!" And then she recalled to mind how Lawrie had told her that Martin loved above all things to dream away hour after hour in the church at Stratford—Shakespeare's church—and what a number of ballads he had written. And now Violet began to see in this Martin Redwood when a boy a resemblance to the "marvellous boy," Chatterton, whom she had read about in her father's library. But, above all, she now remembered (however had she contrived to let so intensely interesting a fact slip from her memory?) that Martin had often talked to Lawrie about Sir Philip Sidney and the Chevalier Bayard. And what an entrancing book that was that Martin had given her brother when they were children, a book

she had loved to read even more than the plays of Shakespeare ! It was a book with a compressed account of the lives of those chivalrous characters by various writers. And the portrait in that book—the portrait of the Chevalier Bayard—what a delight to her in childhood that had been !

It all came back to her now, vivid in detail, as a forgotten dream will sometimes recur when suddenly roused, as these memories had been roused, by this unexpected meeting with Martin Redwood !

And then, again, how could she fail to be impressed even in spite of her confused state of mind, when making her hasty retreat from the crowd, with the angry look on the brave face of her defender, and the dexterous way in which he had made a lunge straight out from the shoulder and struck down her assailant with a single blow ? Lawrie was right. Martin Redwood was a man “fully versed in the noble art of self-defence,” and taught, as Lawrie used to boast, “by his own far-famed parent, the Stratford Slasher !” Yes, Violet could still hear Lawrie’s voice, she could still see the excited glitter in his eyes, while reading about prize-fights from *Bell’s Life in London*, in which the Slasher was frequently a conspicuous figure.

And then again—(how could she possibly forget ?)—had not her brother, Martin Redwood’s enthusiastic pupil, taught her, on his part, all that he had learnt in boxing matches, until she had become almost as formidable in a contest with her brother, when she assumed the gloves, as Lawrie himself ?

Dear Lawrie ! What a happy childhood they had had in a thousand and one ways in their open-air life from year's end to year's end, rambling about woods and meadows round Vesprie Towers. And yet, and yet, she had always persistently refused, in her pride, to meet Martin Redwood.

## CHAPTER VII

### MOLLY

ONE night in Brick Alley Violet's sleep was disturbed by intermittent sounds of coughing outside her door. She conjectured that it came from one of the homeless flower-girls who, when they had not the means of paying for a night's lodging, would creep in at one of the front doors of a tenement, which it was apparently nobody's business to fasten, and sleep in the narrow passage and on the stairs.

It was no new experience for Violet to hear voices on her landing at night, but the coughing became so distressful that she got out of bed, lit her candle, and opened the door. A girl somewhat older than herself was lying on the top stair, with her head resting on her arm. She got up wearily on seeing Violet, and said in an apologetic tone,

"I ain't got a copper to pay for a doss down, and so I just popped in at the fust door in the Alley to sleep on the stairs—yer don't mind?"

"You have a troublesome cough," said Violet.

"Yus; a fair treat, ain't it?"

"There's a dreadful draught here," said Violet.

"Come inside."

"Don't you fuss yourself," said the girl. "I'm used to going to bed like this when I've been out of



luck in the daytime. But thank you all the same. Good-night, miss ! ”

“ No, you must come inside,” persisted Violet, “ you look so ill, and I should get no sleep thinking of you lying out there.”

The girl, with some show of reluctance, entered the room and sat on the corner of Violet’s bed.

When Violet had closed the door, she stood gazing with concern at the girl, for she was aghast at the spectacle of a face so wasted and worn by illness.

A puzzled look suddenly came into her face.

“ Why, where have I seen you before ? ” she said.

“ Ah, *I* know,” said the girl, returning her gaze. “ I remember you very well, miss. It was you who were so kind to me in the Strand one evening, only a few weeks ago.”

“ Was I ? ” said Violet, again looking into her face.

“ Yes, you gave me some money, and what’s more, you took my part when I was persecuted by two bad women. I ain’t forgotten it. I never shall.”

Ah ! thought Violet, the very night upon which she was so grossly insulted, and Lawrie’s friend, Martin Redwood, came to her aid !

“ I am going to make you up a bed,” said Violet. “ There is a very good mattress under this, and two sheets and a blanket, and you can take one of my pillows, I always lie with my head very low. It was an idea of my mother’s. I never use more than one pillow.”

Whereupon Violet, with a celerity which seemed to surprise the girl, took the best clothes from the bed, swung off the upper mattress, pulled out the

lower one, laid it on the floor, and in a few minutes there was a comfortable bed for the girl.

During the whole of the following day Violet's thoughts, in the midst of her laborious work at the book-binding factory, were constantly running upon the poor waif to whom she had given shelter and food. The look of gratitude in the girl's eyes haunted her like a vision at once painful and cheering. She felt less lonely than she had done for many a day.

When she returned in the evening to her room, Violet found the girl slightly better and stronger. She had got up and was sitting in a chair, eating a piece of cold fried haddock which a woman on the same floor had brought in to her. She asked Violet if she might stay there that night, and she had no doubt that in the morning she would be quite well enough to go away.

"What is your name?" said Violet.

"Molly."

Between Violet and Molly there soon grew up a strong and affectionate intimacy. But neither knew the other's surname. They lived in exactly the same condition as others in Brick Alley. Violet soon realised that her new *protégée* wished to keep her past and her name from her, and Molly could not fail to perceive that Violet's sentiment was the same in this regard.

The extra expense of supporting Molly, for whom no work could be found, became so serious that Violet was forced to raise money on a sacred crinket that had belonged to her mother, and which, through all her impecuniosity, she had never yet

attempted to pawn. She said nothing of all this money trouble to the poor girl. She bore this new burden in silence; a premonition was growing strong within her that Molly would soon cease to be a burden, and while she lived she would do the little in her power to succour this helpless waif. She had parted with everything except her scanty wardrobe, and, needless to say, that precious heirloom the rainbow topaz.

Would she be forced to part with *that*?

On one occasion, when Violet was out, Molly got out of bed, for she was still too weak to sit up more than an hour or so during the day, opened the door, and called out "Jennie!"

Her call was soon answered by a slatternly little girl of about thirteen. To this girl Molly gave some coppers, and told her to go and buy her a sheet of note paper, an envelope, a stamp, a penny bottle of ink, and a pen. The child soon returned with the articles she was sent to procure, and was told to come back in half an hour's time. Then Molly sat down at the table and began to write:

"DEAR, DARLING MOTHER,

"When I last wrote to you, I said that I would never write until I was able to write as a lady, but my proud heart blinded and deceived me. I have passed through a great deal since I saw you. I have done what you forbade me to do, and I feel I can never hope for your forgiveness. But I was determined that I would not write to you until I could give you better news. And at last I can do so.

Just at the very moment when I was in my worst need, and had not a bed to lie on or a piece of bread to eat, I was rescued from starvation by a young girl, an angel, mother, who took me in and nursed me through an illness, and has been ten times more than a sister to me ever since. I am getting better now, but I am still a bit weak. She is quite a lady, mother, as I'm going to tell you, but very poor. I have not told her my name, nor where I come from on account of my disgrace. But I have found out who she is, though she don't suspect it. She is Violet Vesprie, the great lady who was turned out of Vesprie Towers.

"I do not tell you where I am living, dear mother, because I don't want you to come and see me, because I want to get well and come and see you.

"Your loving  
"MOLLY."

Day by day Molly grew worse, and one night Violet said, "Molly, I am going to tell you something. I never told you before, because I never intended that anyone should know me as being any other than Violet."

Molly looked up with an expression of intense interest on her face, and sat upright in bed.

"I'll tell you what I've always known—known from the first—that you were a lady, a great lady. Yes. I have always known *that*. There is nothing about you like anybody else I've ever seen or known."

"Well, Molly," Violet went on, without heeding this interruption, "during all my struggle and all

my poverty I have always retained about me a valuable jewel, an heirloom that has come to me through ages of wealthy ancestors. And what I'm going to do now is to take it to a pawnbroker's and raise money on it."

If Violet had herself been dying of starvation, as she had felt convinced from the first, she could not have turned her topaz into money—no, not if she had been dying for want of food would she have parted with the "Vesprie Luck." But this was a very different affair. It was Molly, not she, who was dying for want of proper nourishment.

"No, no—don't do that!" cried Molly, with sudden alarm. "Don't think of pawning a val'able jewel. I am going to get up, and see what the parish officer will do for me. Surely he won't let me starve. The very name of a val'able jewel makes me shudder!"

"Molly," said Violet firmly, "I intend to do it. When I say that, Molly, you know what I mean."

"Please don't! You frighten me," cried the girl, and she began to tremble violently.

"Why, you extraordinary girl!" said Violet. "What *do* you mean?"

"I'm afraid o' jewels," she murmured. "A poor woman I once knew found a val'able jewel; she was mighty poor, and she was tempted to try and pawn it, and she was given over to the police on suspicion and locked up, and it was the ruin of her. Don't think of it, please don't, it'll bring bad luck."

In order to appease the girl, Violet said, "Well, well, let it be as you wish."

After a while the girl fell into a restless doze.

Violet sat watching the face of the sleeping girl ; and while she still sat beside her there came through the window on the sultry, choky air the sound of some street music from a neighbouring thoroughfare. It was a harp and violin, and the tune they were playing was the one which Violet had always loved best in the world, " Home, Sweet Home."

During all Violet's brave struggle with adversity the occasions had been very rare indeed when she gave way to tears. But she gave way now ; and when the harp and violin were, after a little while, accompanied by the voice of a street singer, her bosom rose and fell with a suppressed sob. Fearing lest the sound should disturb the light sleep of the sufferer, she was on the point of rising to close the window when she perceived that a change had come over the features of her sleeping companion. The worn look was gone, and her features were illuminated by the light of a wonderful happiness and love, and then there came from her lips a dream-like echo of the words of the street singer, " Home, Home, Sweet Home."

Presently her lips began to move, and Violet heard the words,

" Yes, mother dear, if you are not too tired we will go out for a walk. Let us go on the banks of the back-water and hear the birds and see the moorhens, and very likely the swans will have swum round into the back-water, as they often do."

" The music," said Violet to herself, " has pierced through her sleep, and ' Home, Sweet Home,' has brought this poor creature pictures of



her own home, as it has brought pictures of mine. *She* comes from some peaceful place. I wonder where it is? It is somewhere far away in the country, where there is a river and a back-water, and where there are swans and moorhens. I *do* wish she would tell me about her birthplace and her old home. But I must never ask her. It is connected with something very, very sad."

The girl's lips again moved.

"She is now wandering by the water-side," said Violet, "and she is talking to her mother about it."

Violet, as she looked at her, was driven to the conclusion that the picture which during all the time of her own stay in London was constantly before her eyes had been seen by her friend through a sort of psychic power that sympathy had roused. But, in truth, it was not a consequence of any such power. The undreamed link between these two girls, mysterious though it may seem, was that they were born in the same locality, born within a few miles of each other. And is there not, perchance, something in the very soil upon which we are born, in the very atmosphere above it, that aids in moulding our characters, if not our destinies? The cradle of our lives draws us to itself wheresoever we go. No wonder that nostalgia acts so powerfully upon us; no wonder that the yearning to return to Vespric Towers was never absent for a day from poor Violet's mind!

When Molly awoke, Violet said,

"Were you dreaming of your home just now?"



"No, not my own home, but near to it, quite near. May I tell it to you?"

"Do, dear. I should like to know about it."

"I feel that this room is a kind of make-believe, and the beautiful scene of my dream just the real thing. It was a dream about the river Vesprie, and the lovely woods of Vesprie Park."

"You know Vesprie Park?" cried Violet.

"Yes, I'm a Thornton girl, I am. My mother was left, not a widow, worse than a widow, with two children, and had to bring us up upon nothing, for in Thornton, where we lived, you see, the shillings are very scarce indeed. Still we managed somehow, and we were happy together; for my mother loved us, and we loved her. She used to call me dear little Molly. There was never a mother loved a daughter as my mother loved me, never, never! And as I grew up I was considered pretty——"

"And you are pretty now," said Violet, in a caressing tone.

The girl gave a wan smile. Then she went on.

"And when my mother used to go out charing I used to stay at home, doing everything in the house. My mother wouldn't let me go from home; she wouldn't let me go into service, because she thought me so pretty, and she was afraid. Things went on like this for a time, and, poor as we were, my mother used to love to come home after her day's work and sit with me and my brother. I had only one thought in those days—my mother. Although mother loved my brother very dearly, it was a different kind of love from that she felt for me—I soon discovered *that*! I once heard her whisper to

a neighbour, "If the Lord should take the boy, I should get over it, in time; but if I should lose my Molly, that would kill me! I could not live without Molly. She is so sweet, so loving, so—so beautiful!"

And the girl broke down and began to sob bitterly.

"You are distressing yourself," said Violet. "Don't tell me anything you would rather not tell me. I am sure you are a true-hearted girl. Don't tell me any more of your story, if it pains you so much."

"I *must* tell you, you are so kind. I *want* to tell you!"

"Oh, don't tell me any more, I can't bear to listen to it! I have learnt so much in the last year or two. Don't tell me any more!"

"Ah! I see you shudder at the thought that I am going to tell you something dreadful."

The girl stopped, and a resolute, almost desperate look came into her grief-stricken eyes as she raised herself upon her pillow and looked into Violet's face.

"I am going to tell you something that will make you shrink from me."

"I shall not shrink from you," said Violet. "Pray do not think that."

Molly hesitated, but presently, brushing away her tears, she went on, "One terrible winter, when we could get nothing to do and were on the brink of starvation, my mother was taken ill, and we were in a dreadful plight. A young gentleman in the neighbourhood, who had often spoken to me and

made up to me, heard of our plight, and came to see us. He was very, very kind to us. He was an officer in the army, he was, and what he did seemed so genuine-like that I—I got to be very fond of him, and I feel certain sure he was a bit fond of me. I went to London, and went into service. But I lost my situation through one thing and another. He would have been willing to marry me—I never doubted that—and he'd have done it, but for his family. And he went to India, and I never saw him—never heard from him—never no more. Well, it ended in my doing what I always felt that I ought to do—go out to Australia in search of my father, who had deserted us. I'd no money to pay for the journey, but I chanced to learn that a family was going out to Melbourne, and I got the situation of nursemaid after a lot of trouble, and went out with them, but I determined not to tell my mother, because I knew it would madden her, the thought of going after my father, who had behaved so ill to us. When I reached Australia I made enquiries, and after a while I learnt that my father had made a huge fortune at the gold diggings, and had left the colony and had gone to New York. The people I went out there with wouldn't believe about my being my father's daughter, and would give me no assistance. I came back to England—don't ask me how I managed it—and when I landed in London I was almost without a penny. I got from bad to worse after that, I did, from bad to worse. I felt I never could go home. I couldn't face poor mother. But I wrote to her, I wrote and told her that I had got work from a market gardener in

Covent Garden, in the early morning. And that was the honest truth. But it ended in my selling flowers in the streets. And that's how I caught my bad cold, and but for you, my best o' friends, I should have been dead by now—yes, dead weeks and weeks ago."

A few days later, Molly's illness took a still more serious turn.

"Dear friend," said she, "I shall not be a burden to you many hours longer now. But, before I die, I'm going to tell you what I found out long ago. You are Miss Vesprie, of Vesprie Towers, and if you had known my name you would have turned your back on me . . . No, no! I don't mean that, but I was afraid you might, so I kept my secret from you. I'm Molly Redwood, and Martin Redwood, the young sailor what had the misfortune to love you so madly, is my brother."

While speaking in a broken voice, scarcely above a whisper, she took from under her pillow a somewhat faded photograph, in a brass locket.

"Promise, if you should ever see him, or if you should ever see my mother, promise me to tell them, with my love, that this portrait is the only thing I had to leave them when I died. Will you, Miss Vesprie?"

"I promise you," said Violet, as she bent over her and placed her hand upon her hair, and kissed her on the forehead, as she had kissed the girl's brother on the osier ait on that never-to-be-forgotten day.

And now there came back to Violet Vesprie's recollection that scene at the fair, and the look of

recognition that had passed between her and Martin Redwood. Should she tell Molly of that distressful scene? No! Should she tell her that Martin had come to her aid on that very night upon which she had saved her when persecuted by those two women of ill-fame, at the corner of Burleigh Street? No; it was too late to tell her now, for Molly was dying. Those golden coins that the poor girl's wretched father, in his drunken fit, had recklessly flung in handfuls to the thoughtless crowd might have saved his child. Her brother might have saved her. Who knows but what he was in search of Molly at the very hour when he came to *her* aid? Who knows? But now it was too late. Nothing, nobody on earth could save her now. It was too late.

The various occupants of the tenement took it for granted that the dead wanderer would be buried by the parish. Not so Violet. It troubled her deeply to think of the poor thing, so gentle, affectionate, and grateful, being buried in a pauper's grave. And she determined to bury her. In doing this last act of friendship to her fellow lodger in the garret in Brick Alley, Violet Vesprie parted with her last shilling.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A GARRET IN SUNFLOWER COURT

AND now came a time of misery in Violet Vesprie's life so painful that I must be forgiven for leaving it unrecorded. I would not even touch upon it here—I could not—but from a knowledge within me of brighter days that were in store for her.

Actual starvation was before her, for she could get no employment; and very likely she would have starved had she not one night accidentally come upon one of her fellow work-girls in the book-folding business, who insisted upon taking her into a cheap cook-shop and giving her some supper. This girl told her that a few shillings a week could be earned in a jam factory by pasting labels upon the jars. Violet went to this place, and entered upon a new kind of drudgery, but after a while business became slack, and she was discharged.

That morning, with only a few pence in her pocket, without the least prospect of finding work, she wandered towards Piccadilly, listlessly gazing into the shops, trying to distract her mind from desperate thoughts.

After a while she found herself wedged in the crowd. It was some time before she realised what the equipages meant that were blocked in the street before her; but she found herself looking



into one of the carriages, in which sat a beautiful young woman in white satin, with an immense bouquet in her lap. She was dressed in a low dress, smothered with lace; here and there peeped out a glittering gem. She was engaged in what seemed very earnest conversation with a middle-aged lady who sat with her, a lady exquisitely dressed in rose-coloured silk covered with gems.

As Violet stood and gazed into the motionless carriage, she recalled those tales of Drawing-room glories which her mother had repeatedly told her in the old days at Vesprie Towers, and she felt that the beautiful young woman in the carriage might be herself, and that the lady was her dear lost mother; and then a vivid, dramatic picture lived before her eyes. She imagined herself and her mother going through all the wonderful fairy story of a Presentation at Court. She saw herself mingling in a splendid throng of English aristocracy. Then, for the first time during these sorrowful days, tears came to her relief and trickled down her cheeks.

She turned away from the crowd and found herself presently in Hyde Park. She sank down wearily upon a bench in a quiet spot under the trees. The thought of expending a penny on a chair never entered her head now.

To her surprise, a chair-keeper came up while she was still seated there and said,

“Do you remember, miss, sitting on one of my chairs some time ago?”

“Of course I do; I remember you well,” said Violet. “But why do you ask?”



“ Well, miss, while you were sitting in a chair one day, I see’d a lady in a wonderfully splashing turn-out twist round and stare at you in a most extraordinary way, and actually look back as the carriage went on, in order to keep you in sight as long as possible. She was a grey-haired, elderly sort of lady, and sad-like, and she was driving a pair of ’osses as spick as any pair I ever saw in the Row.”

“ Well,” said Violet, “ and what has that to do with me ? ”

“ I’m agoing to tell you, miss,” said the man. “ The carriage came back, and when it reached this spot where you’d been sitting it pulled up, and the lady stepped out and walked towards the vacant chair where, as it chanced, I was standing. ‘ There was a young girl sitting in one of these chairs a few minutes ago,’ sez she. ‘ Yes,’ sez I, ‘ there wur, and I’ve often thought o’ letting her sit here for nothing, but I was afear’d I might offend her, for though poor, she looks too proud for that.’ ‘ Ah ! ’ sez the lady, ‘ you never said a truer word. She’s the proudest young woman in London, and she’s reason to be ! ’ ‘ So I’d say,’ sez I. ‘ I’ve know’d the young woman myself for a long while now. I remember her first coming to sit on one of my chairs three or four years ago, and she was better off then, I’m thinking; she used to amuse me, she did ! ’ ‘ How ? ’ sez the lady. ‘ Why,’ sez I, ‘ I never know’d anyone take such a good pen’orth out of a chair as *she* did. She stared at the carriages and things just as a child stares at a peep-show ! She did enjoy it, and no mistake ! ’ ‘ Did you chance to see which way she went just now ? ’ sez the lady.

‘No,’ sez I, ‘I couldn’t say. I went up to the other end to collect pennies, and when I come back she was gone.’ ”

Violet’s curiosity was roused. Could it be some lady of title who had known her parents in the old days? And, strange to relate, this was the season of the year when a yearning to see once again the beloved trees and grass and flowers of Vesprie Park came upon Violet with exceptional force. Had that lady ever been to Vesprie Towers?

In the garret that evening at sunset Violet sat lost in dreams of the past and future, her face resting between her two open hands. She had left Brick Alley months ago, and was now living in a place even less inviting, known as Sunflower Court.

“Mine is the plight,” she was thinking, “in which people commit suicide. I can imagine poor Chatterton in *his* garret with a dose of arsenic before him. To him death could come as the only benefactor. He was not supported by the belief in the Vesprie luck as *I* am. In his terrible fight with life he, the son of a gravedigger, had not what I have got to keep him up—the sense of family traditions. If *I* were to yield to the temptation, I should bring a slur upon the name of Vesprie! I could never do that.

“This is the hour when the Vespries die. My dear father died at the set of sun, and they say *his* father died at sunset before him.

“And yet never did I feel so strong a presentiment that the Vesprie luck was approaching as I do now when I am so faint and ill for the want of food.”

She gave another look at the red radiance breaking through the miserable, patched panes of the garret window. Then, either from want of food or fatigue after her tiring walk, she fell asleep, her head resting on the window sill, and dreamed that she had returned to Vesprie Towers.

It seemed to her that she was listening as of yore to the cuckoo, and the tinkling of the sharpening scythe and the call of the corncrake; and the perfume of the newly-cut grass seemed to be wafted into the room.

Presently she awoke, the perfume still tantalizing her senses. And now the longing to see Vesprie Towers and Vesprie Park in its summer beauty became irresistible. It had never come upon her with such force before. At moments like these it was her invariable habit to take out from the pocket of her dress the rainbow topaz and gaze into its iridescence, lost in dreamy thoughts of her old home. She drew it forth now and looked down into it intently. Of a sudden she gave a start, and exclaimed, "Why did I never think of *that* before? Yes! Surely he will help me. I cannot take such a jewel as this to a pawnshop! Poor Molly was quite right. But he will have compassion on me. He will not have the heart to disregard my supplication."

Her mind was now fully made up to call on Mr. Walton, the solicitor of that kind friend of hers, the late Mr. Brandon, the mortgagee.

And so next morning, having consulted a direc-

story, Violet turned her steps towards John Walton's office.

The firm of Walton and Walton, of Leadenhall Street, had been for many years, and still was, one of the most prosperous and most fortunate firms in the legal profession.

Their business, originally a large conveyancing one in Lincoln's Inn, had been removed into the city because city company after city company had, mainly through the genius, financial as well as legal, of Mr. Walton, been attracted to that firm.

The sunshine of prosperity seemed to gleam through the London smoke upon the very offices in which the business was carried on. The clerks were the best paid among the law clerks in London, and the most lightly worked. To get into the office of Walton and Walton was the aspiration of nearly every law clerk in London, for each poor struggling clerk trying, and often trying in vain, to keep a roof over his family and himself, knew that it was the custom in this clerical paradise for every clerk to retire, if he chose, on three-fourths of his salary, after a certain age, or to continue until the infirmities of age made it impossible for him to work. This liberality had been a factor of some importance in the ever-widening reputation of Walton and Walton. For when the managing clerks of other firms had occasion to utter the name of Walton and Walton in the hearing of the clients a reverential hush came upon their voices, and the clients remembered this. It was an axiom of Mr. Walton's that liberality is a good investment.

It was to this most respectable firm that Violet took her way on the morning following her sudden resolution to visit Vesprie Towers.

She enquired for Mr. Walton.

“What name?” said the clerk.

“Miss Vesprie.”

The clerk gave her a startled look, which he quickly suppressed, and asking her to take a seat, went down a passage leading to the principal's room.

After he returned he ushered her into the room where sat Mr. Walton.

He rose from his chair as she entered and received her with a politeness she had scarcely expected. His whole manner put her at once at her ease.

“You remember me, Mr. Walton?”

“Perfectly, Miss Vesprie. I called upon you at Vesprie Towers when forced, on behalf of my client, to perform a painful duty.”

“Yes. It is four years ago.”

“Yes, Miss Vesprie, four years since we—we lost sight of you.”

“And now, Mr. Walton, I have come to ask your aid in order to enable me to go and see my old home once more.”

While speaking she took the jewel and held it out to Mr. Walton.

“What is this?”

“The Vesprie Luck,” said Violet.

“Ah! I heard of this from the late Mr. Brandon. An heirloom, I think, that has been in the Vesprie family for centuries.”

“Yes. I have come to ask you if—if you will

advance me a few pounds upon this jewel, enough to pay for my journey to my old home."

Mr. Walton leant back in his chair, and after a thoughtful pause, said in a kind voice, as he held the jewel up to the light,

"I think I may be able to do something for you, Miss Vesprie, without your parting with this heirloom. What is the amount you require for your journey to Vesprie Towers?"

"Five or six pounds would be ample. But——"

"Then, my dear Miss Vesprie, pray let me be your creditor for six pounds."

He gave her back the jewel while speaking, and then opening a drawer in his desk, took out six sovereigns, which he handed to Violet.

"But," said she, hesitatingly, "when—when shall I repay it?"

"We will talk about that on another occasion," said Mr. Walton significantly. "Good morning!" and he held out his hand. "When you get to Vesprie Towers, ask at the lodge if there are any letters for Miss Violet Vesprie. You will find one from me waiting for you. Good morning."

And he escorted her to the door of his room with as much ceremony as he would have bestowed upon the most important among his aristocratic clients.

Mr. Walton's courteous attitude towards Violet Vesprie did not trouble her in the least degree, or indeed cause her any surprise; and as she hastened on her way to Sunflower Court through the thoroughfares, there sounded in her ears above the noisy traffic the words that were seldom absent from her

mind, "The Vesprie Luck—the Vesprie Luck!" and she pressed her hand caressingly over her pocket where the rainbow topaz was resting, still in her possession, as it had rested ever since she quitted Vesprie Towers four years gone by.



## BOOK III

THE RETURN TO VESPRIE TOWERS



## CHAPTER I

JOSEPHINE

TOWARDS evening on the day following her visit to Mr. Walton, Violet Vesprie stood like a stranger at the old lodge gate at the entrance to Vesprie Park.

A young woman came hurrying out of the lodge before Violet had time to ring the gate bell.

"I've called for a letter which I was told would be waiting for me here. My name is Violet Vesprie."

"Miss Vesprie? Why, yes. The letter came by post this morning. Pray come in, miss, and I'll run and fetch it for you."

While speaking she swung open the gate and then went into the lodge, quickly returning with the expected letter.

Violet thanked her as she turned her steps towards the Towers.

The moment she was alone she opened the letter. It was brief, but there was a note inside addressed to "Miss Thiriwell, Vesprie Towers."

The letter ran,

"DEAR MISS VESPRIE,

"The enclosed is an introduction to Miss Thirlwell, who has taken Vesprie Towers on a short

lease. She is fully conversant with everything connected with your affairs. I have left it to her to break to you all the news that has been waiting for you many a day now. She will perform the task a thousand times better than I could have hoped to do at my office when you called, even had I placed an entire day at your disposal.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ JOHN WALTON.”

While reading this letter Violet was walking slowly along under the old avenue of elms. Looking up, she presently espied a lady coming towards her with a quick and sprightly walk.

There are certain faces—they are few—which are so individual in their formation and expression that to guess the nationality of them is quite impossible. The young lady, apparently about twenty-six years of age, was one of these. Her face was oval, the forehead was broad, and as beautiful as Violet's own, and yet the modelling was so different from Violet's forehead that no likeness could be traced between them. Although the cheek-bones were a little higher than is generally considered beautiful, they did not seem to mar the beauty of the face, but they seemed in some unaccountable way to increase the beauty. The nose, though a little too small, was regular, straight and perfect; the mouth was not quite so full and beautiful as Violet's, for the lips were scarcely full enough, yet they were lovely in their shape. The eyes, which were far apart, were large, bright, and of a richness which made them seem sometimes black and some-

times dark purple, and matched with the thick mass of blue-black hair—fine, straight and silky. It was, however, the tone of the skin that was perhaps the most striking feature of the face; it was as if upon the fair cheek of an English girl a soft yellow light had been shed. Her figure, compared with Violet's, seemed *petite*. But the contour of her bust and arms, combined with her remarkably erect figure, gave her quite a commanding appearance.

She approached Violet with a perfect ease and freedom in her manner. But suddenly she stopped and gazed into the girl's face.

"Miss Vesprie? He has found you then, at last!" and holding out her hand she said, smilingly, "I am Miss Thirlwell; I am glad to welcome you to Vesprie Towers. I have been looking forward to this pleasure for—for ever so long!"

But Violet, who was gazing down the avenue like one in a dream, although she glanced for a moment into the young lady's face as she spoke to her, seemed scarcely to have caught her words.

Miss Thirlwell regarded her with some concern.

"You are tired after your long journey," said she, in a tone of sympathy.

"Yes, I am tired," said Violet, wearily. "May I rest here for an hour before I go back to London? I only came to see my dear old home once more. How delightful it looks in all its lovely summer beauty! I should like to wander about the park for an hour or two, if I may; and then—and then——"

"Won't you come indoors and rest? Your room—your old room—is all ready for you. I'm

not going to let you go back to London, you know. I want you to stop, as my guest, I mean. I have so many things to tell you, for, you see, you have been away so long. And—and I have promised Mr. Walton to tell you all about everything that has happened since the very day you turned your back on Vesprie Towers—four years ago, I'm told—just four years ago.”

“Yes,” said Violet, still looking dreamily about her, “four years ago!”

As they passed in at the entrance to Vesprie Towers and began to ascend the stairs, Violet, still looking dreamily around, said,

“Nothing is changed. Everything looks exactly as I left it! I am so glad.”

“Yes, nothing has been changed,” said Miss Thirlwell. “I felt sure you would come back some day, and I have kept everything as I found it. Something told me that I should be doing what would please you, and it seems my instinct was right.”

Miss Thirlwell left her guest at her bedroom door with a sprightly “*Au revoir!*” and descended the stairs with a light step, singing as she went snatches from a French song with all the vivacity of a born Parisian.

When Violet entered her room she found every article of furniture just as she had left it. She threw open the window and looked out upon the park. The day was drawing to a close, and she sat down as she had done on the night before leaving Vesprie Towers, and listened to the rooks as they went by on their way to the rookery on another side of the Towers.

“Yes; it’s all a dream. I’ve never been away from my dear old home. I shall soon wake up and find that the four years in London is only a dream after all.”

Presently a servant came in with a tray which she arranged on a table near Violet’s seat at the window.

“Please, miss,” said the girl, “I was asked to say as Miss Thirlwell thought that being tired you might like to be alone. So I’ve brought you some tea and a few little things that she thought you might like.”

“Thank you. Yes, I should like to be alone this evening. I am very tired.”

The night closed in. Violet crept into bed. She slept soundly. It was the healthful dreamless slumber of a young girl breathing her native air; and when morning dawned she was awakened by the song of the Vesprie birds, as in the days gone by.

The impulse to hasten out into the park was irresistible, and she was soon flitting about among the matchless trees, enjoying the witchery of it all, visiting the old haunts, as though no time beyond a night had elapsed, as though the four years’ absence from her beloved home had for the moment been completely wiped from her recollection. She met no one, and this fact gave increased force to her sense of solitude—that delightful sense that she was alone at Vesprie Park as in the days of yore.

The spell was broken at last by the sight of Miss Thirlwell saluting her from the steps of the terrace.

As Violet approached, her hostess went out to welcome her, and there came into her eyes a look



of admiration and friendliness that was unmistakable. Violet stepped towards her impulsively and held out her hand to take her outstretched hand in greeting.

"The sunrise was so lovely that Ariel ran away with me," said Violet. "I get so excited in the Vesprie sunshine, when I hear the Vesprie birds beginning to sing, that I quite forget all about the flight of time."

The two girls were drawn irresistibly towards each other. Violet had begun to feel as deep an interest in Miss Thirlwell as it was clear to her Miss Thirlwell had begun to feel in her.

"Won't you come in to breakfast?" she said. "I was coming out to look for you. And you must be hungry after your long ramble through the park."

And she led the way across the terrace towards the French windows.

"Ah!" said Violet as they went in, "this is my favourite room. It was my mother's boudoir, you know."

"It's my favourite sitting-room," said Miss Thirlwell, seating herself at the breakfast table. "I've heard it was your mother's boudoir. My studio—I'm an artist, you know—is in one of the delightful rooms upstairs."

"You seem to know something about us—I mean the Vesprie family."

"Yes, I have learnt everything about you from Mr. Walton. I think I know more about your family, Miss Vesprie, than most people."

Violet looked up into Miss Thirlwell's face while stirring her coffee in a slow meditative way and said,

“Is it about my family that you have something to tell me? Mr. Walton led me to think that he had left it to you to break some news to me that he wished me to hear. Is it so?”

“Yes; something about your family. But that’s not all the news. I’ve a score of things to tell you. The fact is, Miss Vesprie, I’ve so much to tell you—so much to talk to you about—that I don’t know where to begin.”

“Will it—will it take very long to tell me—everything?”

“Yes. It will take days—perhaps weeks.”

“Weeks? But, I’m going back to London to-day. I only came to have one look round at the dear old home, as I told you last night. I’ve taken a return ticket to town. I’m serious, I really mean it! I dare not stop—I——” and she paused, and moving towards the window looked out upon the park, brilliant in its dazzling morning light. “If I stayed here another day my resolution would fail me; I shouldn’t ever find the courage to turn my back again on Vesprie Towers. Oh! you don’t know—you don’t know what this home is to me!”

“I think I do,” said Miss Thirlwell, in a low voice. “No one knows it so well as I do. I want companionship—a friend. Won’t you be that friend? Come!” she added, “let us go and sit down in the park. Perhaps by the time we’ve found a nice shady spot I shall have made up my mind where to begin. I think I shall interest you, for all I have to tell you concerns you very deeply indeed.”

When they had wandered some distance among

the trees, Miss Thirlwell said, as they sat down side by side.

"I think I ought to begin by telling you that Mr. Walton has been searching for you everywhere for more than a year past. It was known that you were living somewhere in London with a destitute girl, named Molly Redwood, but your place of abode could not be traced, though no expense was spared in making the search for you and the unfortunate young woman."

"Poor Molly!" said Violet in a sad and meditative voice.

"I will not ask you to speak about your hard life in London for the last four years," said Miss Thirlwell. "The story of your sufferings is written in your face. Some day, if it should afford you any relief to acquaint me with your story, you will find me ready and willing to listen; for I sympathise with you more than I can hope to prove to you—at present. Some day—something tells me already—we shall be such close friends that we shall scarcely keep a thought from each other."

"Ah! something tells *me* the same! Will you tell me your name—your christian name, I mean?"

"Josephine. Your name is Violet. That I know of course."

"Yes. You were talking about Molly," said she; "will you tell me all you know?"

"I was about to do so," said Josephine, "for, as I was saying, it concerns you more than you suppose."

"Anything you can tell me about Molly will interest me."

After a pause, Josephine began.

"You learnt from Molly that she was the daughter of a poor woman whose husband had deserted her and who lived in this very village—a woman named Joan Redwood."

"Yes, she told me that; but she was very reticent about her life up to the last day. They were poor people living in Thornton, and living in great tribulation and distress."

"They were, indeed! Molly and her mother got a scant livelihood by field work. It was so scant, as I was told, that Molly determined to get a situation in service; but as she knew how remote were her chances of doing so in Thornton she went on hoping that she might find a place in London. Now, like so many women whose lives have been so entirely spent in the country, the mother had a great dread of London and its dangers for young girls in service. But there seemed no way out of it. She had to submit, for Molly, hearing of a situation in a wealthy family in the West-end of London, went into service. And for a time, indeed, all seemed well. But before many months had gone by, Mrs. Redwood got the distressing news that Molly had lost her situation, though apparently not through any fault of her own. It chanced, as luck would have it, that one of Molly's fellow servants got hold of a copy of the *Thornton Gazette* that contained an account of her father's disgrace."

"I heard about that," said Violet. "Yes, it was the talk of Thornton for days. Her father, Jerry Redwood, was a prize-fighter and a low drunkard. He killed a man at a fair. He was

convicted of manslaughter, and was sentenced to a year's imprisonment."

"The housekeeper at the West-end mansion," continued Miss Thirlwell, "got hold of the newspaper and she spoke to Molly about it. She said she was very sorry, but that it was her duty to show it to the mistress. The consequence was that Molly was discharged with a month's wages in advance. The girl, with all this trouble upon her, did not lose heart. She wrote cheerily to her poor mother that she would find work, and telling her not to expect to hear from her again until she got settled in a new situation. This letter depressed the mother deeply, though she could not say why it should do so. She had full confidence in the purity and restraint of Molly's nature; and yet she brooded distressfully over the thought of Molly out of place and alone in London. The mother knew when she came to calculate what sum Molly had sent her out of her wages that the month's money in advance must be her girl's entire capital, and she knew that nothing would induce her, in whatever strait she might be, to appeal to her for help."

"What a pitiful situation!" Violet interposed, half lost in the conflicting thoughts of all that Josephine Thirlwell was telling her and her own experiences with Molly Redwood in their poverty-stricken garret in Brick Alley.

"Days and days passed," continued Josephine, "but no letter came from Molly. One night the woman sprang up out of her sleep and cried out, 'Something dreadful is happening to her! I must go to London and find her out.' As a matter of

fact, as no doubt Molly told you, she had gone to Melbourne in quest of her father."

"Yes," said Violet; "she went out, she told me, as a servant with some family to Australia."

"She also told you, perhaps," said Josephine, "that before she went into service in the midst of their terrible poverty, the girl had frequently urged upon her mother that some vigorous effort should be made to get at the father, who had made money in Australia, and compel him to support them?"

"Poor Molly! No, but she told me that she reached Melbourne just too late. She learnt that her father had gone to New York. But the fellow, who seemed undoubtedly to be rolling in wealth, came to England. I saw him."

"You saw that disreputable prize-fighter? When, Miss Vesprie?"

"Before I ever saw Molly," said Violet. "But I never knew that they were related, until it was too late! Some day I will tell you where that repulsive drunkard crossed my path. But not now! Please go on. It's too painful to speak about at the moment! I hate even to think of it! I only wish I could dismiss it from my thoughts. But I never can."

That scene at the fair on the occasion of her excursion to Stratford-on-Avon with Mrs. Carlish all came rushing back upon her mental vision. The sight of Martin Redwood and his recognition of her; the look of anger and scorn that he had directed towards his low-bred, dissipated father as he cast his gold among the crowd, again began to haunt her in all its pitiful detail.



Josephine looked with a wonder-stricken glance into Violet's face, completely dumbfounded at her show of agitation. But presently she went on.

"Not knowing that Molly had gone to Melbourne, the poor woman went to London in search of her, but where to look for her she had not the remotest idea. She had sold a piece of furniture, and the proceeds enabled her to spend a week in town. When she reached the address from which Molly's last letter had been written, after losing her situation through her father's evil reputation, the spectacle of the squalid court brought a sense of still keener dread and dismay. The entrance to the court was open, and on rapping at the door of a front room she found that the occupant did not even know that Molly had ever stayed in the building; nor did the occupants of any of the rooms on the first floor. When she reached the second floor she found a door half open, and looking in she caught sight of an old crone sitting in front of a miserable fireplace, rubbing her hands as though there were a fire burning brightly in the hearth. This woman, after a good deal of questioning, remembered Molly. She told the distressed mother that the girl had lived in a room on the same floor, but being unable to pay her rent, had been obliged to leave the place. The old woman, who was garrulous enough, told her that she had urged her to go back to her friends in the country, but her answer had been that they were as poor as herself, and that she meant to find work, somehow."

"That must have been about the time," said



Violet, "when I found her upon the staircase outside my room."

"Well," said Josephine, "after a wretched week spent in further fruitless search, Mrs. Redwood went back penniless to her own poverty-stricken cottage at Thornton. It was soon after her return that she got a letter from Molly with the news that she had found a friend, and that that friend was the lady of Vesprie Towers."

"She told her mother that?"

"Yes; for she recognized you almost on the first day that you took her in and shared with her the scanty earnings you got at the factory where you worked."

"Yes; she told me at the last that she had guessed who I was."

"But," said Josephine, "she never let her mother know where you were living; she never let her know a word about the dire poverty and distress in which she found you. All this came to Mrs. Redwood's knowledge afterwards, when Molly was dead and you had left Brick Alley."

"How did she get to know?"

"Ah, that is what I am going to tell you. The whole story of Mrs. Redwood's life after her return to Thornton from her vain search for Molly was so strange and unexpected that she could scarcely believe her own senses. News came to her that her husband was in London, and that he had amassed an enormous fortune in the gold diggings in Australia, and that he was coming to Thornton to see her. When she heard it, her one thought was, not about his money, but how to break the news

to him that Molly—for whom in her childhood he had professed the deepest affection—was lost.”

“What happened? How did she face him?”

“She felt that she never could,” said Josephine. “She felt that he would cast all the blame upon her, and probably strike her down. For she had good reason to know the man. But fortunately for her, Mrs. Redwood never had to go through the ordeal of confronting her ill-conditioned, disreputable husband. He was seized with a fit during a drunken bout, and died after a few hours’ illness.”

“That is the fate that a friend of mine—the good Mrs. Carlish—predicted he would meet with,” said Violet, “when she saw him, at the time I saw him, the worse for drink.”

“Well, Mrs. Redwood now found herself a woman of fortune,” said Josephine, “for Jerry Redwood, the Bendigo millionaire, as he was called, left her all his wealth.”

“Stop! Perhaps you can tell me,” said Violet hesitatingly, and with a sudden show of agitation. “There was a son, Molly’s brother, Martin. Did none of the money go to him?”

“No. Father and son were on bad terms,” said Josephine. “Martin Redwood—a man with the finest nature I ever knew—deeply resented the reckless life the mad fool was leading. The man swore that he would cut Martin off with a shilling, and he did. But we will talk about Martin Redwood another time, shall we?”

Receiving no answer, Josephine glanced towards the girl. She was gazing into space like one lost

in thought, and scarcely seemed to have heard the question.

"Mrs. Redwood's first thought now was to use her wealth—her whole fortune if needful—in her search for Molly. But before she left Thornton she put a couple of women in the cottage—a girl named Lizzie Curtis and her grandmother—in case of her daughter's return during her absence to her native village. They were a trusty couple who had known Molly from childhood."

"Molly often spoke to me of a girl named Lizzie. Is she still living in the cottage?"

"No. She and her grandmother are occupying the lodge. Lizzie Curtis opened the gate for you when you came in last evening, I expect. A dark, handsome woman of about twenty-five, wasn't it?"

"Is that Lizzie? I will go and have a talk with her before—before I go away. But I'm interrupting you," said Violet. "So Mrs. Redwood went to London again to look for Molly, I suppose?"

"Yes. She took a house in a quiet street near the Regent's Park as a sort of *pied-à-terre* to which she could go at night, or, rather, in the early hours of the morning, as was more frequently her habit. One room in the Regent's Park house was furnished expressly with a view of reminding Molly, should she ever see it, of the room in the cottage at Thornton, with which she had been most familiar as a child. In it she had a bookcase, fitted like Martin's bookcase, with a glass bowl of fish on the top of it. For she was always thinking of Molly and of the day when she would be found and brought to this London home."

And all this time, thought Violet, during all those terrible days, Molly was hidden away with her in Brick Alley, poverty-stricken, suffering in body and mind, and drifting nearer and nearer to death's door at every hour! If they had only known, perhaps even then her life might have been saved!

"But I should tell you," said Josephine, "that it was our friend, Mr. Walton, who acted as Mrs. Redwood's solicitor. He engaged several detectives—the best that gold could procure; nothing was omitted that could be thought of or devised. But no trace ever came to Joan Redwood of the footsteps in London of her beloved Molly; and night after night as she lay in bed after her wearisome peregrinations she would bury her face in her pillow and sob out one word, "Molly—Molly!" Day by day she realized the fact that money after all had not the power to give Molly back to her. The wild expenditure of her wealth in the quest for Molly did nothing for her; and as to her huge fortune, this lavish outlay made no impression on it whatever.

"And so the weeks and months passed, and so went on this poor mother's search for the child who was her very life. Still, with the passage of time she did not relinquish her quest. Something told her that Molly was alive and in London, the moment she got into the London streets, and this feeling never left her. This mysterious 'something' was a sixth sense, the sense which perhaps mankind universally had once and has now lost in civilized life, the sense like that exercised by the Australian

bushman, who, while his white conquerors perish—lost in the bush—finds his way easily to his home and his friends, the sense like that of the homing bee across the sunny meadows, the sense that enables the young cuckoo which has never been trained to his destiny by any fond parent, like the swift and the swallow, to follow the summer to the climes where its parents have revelled for ages upon ages! It was a blind movement of this sense, but only a blind one. It told her that Molly was alive and not far off, but its power was not strong enough to lead her to her child. At last a letter came, bearing the Thornton postmark. It was from Lizzie Curtis. The letter was short, but it enclosed one that made Joan Redwood's heart beat wildly, for it was in Molly's handwriting . . .”

“But, how was this?” said Violet. “She never found her. I should have been the first to know. She never came to Brick Alley while Molly was alive. I was there with her until—until the last.”

“No. There you are right. She never found Molly alive. The letter contained no address, but the postmark led her to conclude that she was living somewhere in the East of London. It was a clue, and the search was pursued with greater perseverance than ever. She again spoke of you and how you had saved her from starvation, and how you had nursed her through an illness, and had promised to find her work as soon as she was well enough to get about. Do I weary you?”

“No, indeed! What happened when Mrs. Redwood got that letter from Molly? I am deeply interested.”

"It ought to interest you," said Josephine, with an expressive smile, "for it is all about *you* now."

"About me?"

"All I have been telling you," said Josephine, "and all that I'm going to tell you about Molly's mother was told to me by Mr. Walton. I never saw Joan Redwood. I wish I had, for many reasons, as you will learn some day."

"Some day?"

"Yes, when we come to know each other—when we come to be friends. And," said Josephine, "I don't think that time is very far distant."

"It seems to me already," said Violet, "that I have known you for ever so long."

Josephine placed her hand caressingly upon Violet's and said, "They found the room in Brick Alley, the room," said Josephine, "in which you gave Molly shelter and tended her to the last. But they found it when it was too late. It would seem that when Molly died, from all that Mr. Walton discovered, you left the neighbourhood, and no one could tell him where you had gone."

"Yes, I left the neighbourhood."

"Molly's mother went to Brick Alley and took your room and furnished it, and although she did not live there, she spent more time there than any where else. She was never tired of questioning the people who occupied the court about Molly and you. No details concerning your lives in those wretched surroundings were too insignificant for her eager ears. By-the-bye," Josephine suddenly added, "Mrs. Redwood did get a glimpse of you—



at least she fancied she did, when out in her carriage one day in Hyde Park."

"Ah!" And all that the park-keeper had told her about the lady driving a magnificent pair of horses who had made anxious enquiries about her recurred to Violet's mind, and she hastened to recount the incident.

"Well," said Josephine, "she was now almost as anxious to discover your whereabouts as she had been to find her child. Her sense of gratitude towards you for your tenderness and devotion to Molly during her last days was the most pathetic sight ever witnessed. That is what Mr. Walton told me. But he is coming down to Vesprie Towers as soon as he can give us a day of his busy life, and then he will tell you of the message Joan Redwood sent you and many other things that I'm sure will interest you very much."

"Mrs. Redwood isn't dead, is she?"

"Yes. One day she sent for Mr. Walton. He found her in that room of yours—that attic in Brick Alley—that was to her the one sacred spot on this earth, the room where you lived and where you nursed her Molly, and where Molly died. The truth is that the poor woman, broken in health and spirits, had long determined to die in what she called "Molly's room." And there she did die, and the last words to Mr. Walton that the mother ever uttered were words of inexpressible gratefulness to you."

Violet sat for a long time lost in gloomy thought over all that Josephine Thirlwell had been relating. At last her new friend, concerned at her appearance



of depression, rose from her seat beneath the tree, and said in a cheery way,

“ Shall we go in ? It’s past luncheon time ; and I’m afraid I’ve tired you with all I’ve been telling you so soon after coming down to Vesprie Towers. I ought to have waited a few days until you had got more colour into your cheeks. It was my thoughtlessness.”

And while talking she led the way towards the house.

After luncheon, Violet fell asleep in her mother’s old arm-chair near the open window, for she had by no means recovered from all the fatigue and agitation occasioned by the sudden transposition from her miserable state of life into this enchanting atmosphere of her ancestral surroundings. She was roused by the sound of Josephine’s step on the terrace outside.

“ I’m glad you’ve had a rest,” said she, looking down smilingly into Violet’s face. “ Shall we have some tea now ? ”

When the tea tray had been removed, the two girls seated themselves near the open window.

“ May I ask you something ? ” said Violet. “ I’m getting rather bewildered. I suppose it’s this sudden change. I can’t account for it in any other way. And when I look back upon all the miserable scenes I have gone through, I feel more bewildered still.”

“ Pray question me as much as you like,” said Josephine. “ I can understand your bewilderment.

It's a marvel to me that you look so bright and well, considering everything. I expected to meet someone broken in health and spirits. That you certainly are not, and I'm more pleased to see it than I can express."

Violet looked earnestly into her friend's face. "No one in our family," said she, "was ever known to lose heart. Don't you know why?"

"No," said Josephine.

"It's our undying belief in the Vesprie luck."

"Ah! I've heard about that," said Josephine. "I've heard about the luck of Vesprie Towers. You belong to a wonderful family, Miss Vesprie. I've never heard of any family like it, and I've been a globe-trotter ever since I was a child, and in my journeys I've met all sorts and conditions of men. Your family history, as told to me by Mr. Walton and—and others, beats everything."

"The question I want to ask you is about Vesprie Towers," said Violet. "In his letter to me, Mr. Walton says that you've taken Vesprie Park on a short lease."

"Yes, I've taken the place on a short lease."

"From Mr. Walton?"

"Yes, Miss Vesprie, from Mr. Walton."

After a short pause, Violet said,

"He's not the owner of Vesprie Towers. You don't mean that, of course."

"No, he's not the owner. He was appointed the late Mr. Brandon's executor and trustee; and as I've been given to understand, he is still trustee of the Vesprie property."

After a long and more thoughtful pause, Violet said,

“Did Mr. Walton ever tell you that there is a tradition in the Vesprie family that Vesprie Towers cannot be sold? My father told me so, and no one among our ancestors ever believed more firmly in the tradition than he did. They may try to sell it—they have often tried—but they cannot. It’s the luck of the Vespries! There is some mysterious power, my father would say, that prevents the Vesprie lands from passing out of the Vesprie family.”

“Ah, I see!” said Josephine. “You want to know if that so-called mysterious power still controls the destiny of your family. Is it so?”

“Yes,” said Violet. “I’m burning to know.”

“Well,” said Josephine, “all I can tell you is that, as trustee for the owners of Vesprie Towers and the Vesprie lands—whoever they may be—Mr. Walton is the person most likely to be able to satisfy your very natural curiosity. Perhaps he may make it possible for me to enlighten you. We shall soon know. Come, you’ve not been to my studio yet. Will you honour me with a visit?”

And with a playful wave of her hand, she preceded Violet up the old stairs, singing blithely as she went.

## CHAPTER II

### A SENSITIVE CREOLE

DAYS went by ; still Violet lingered on at Vesprie Towers. In Josephine she had found a companion after her own heart, and she shrank more and more every day from the thought of again leaving the beloved home of her forefathers, where she had previously lived alone in her romantic "Island of Poverty," as she had called it. For her days of adversity in London became the dream now—Vesprie Towers the reality. She began to roam about the house and grounds with scarcely less freedom of action than she had experienced in the summer days of yore. For no visitors came to Vesprie Towers. It was the life that was her choice—a life as solitary as she desired. Often resting in a hammock which she had had fixed in a shady spot in the park, she would read a romantic story or a poetic play, or dream her day-dreams with closed book, without the slightest risk of interruption. She was no more depressed in her present irresponsible existence than she had been during the days when she lived entirely alone.

The beauty and the wonderfulness of life—the delicious thing it is to live—frequently came upon her, and little, suppressed inarticulate sounds would

come from her lips, as though her body must give vent to the delight she felt.

Her companion, Josephine Thirlwell, as she soon discovered, was an artist of remarkable talent ; and if she was not sketching in the park, she was busy at her easel in the studio upstairs that had once been Lawrie's room. It seemed tacitly understood between the two friends that they should lead their own lives without ceremony or thought of restraint.

During one of their first evenings together in "mother's boudoir," as they called it, where the two girls had soon become deeply confiding, Josephine related to Violet how she was sent when quite young to one of the most delightful schools in New York.

"And," said Josephine, "extremely happy I was there, for I soon found that my schoolmistress had taken to me in a most extraordinary way !"

"Not more than *I* did," said Violet, laying her hand upon Josephine's, "for I perceived at our first interview that there was a wonderful magic about you. There is a book, I remember, in my father's library about a conversation with Goethe, giving some remarks about what was called the 'dæmonic element' in certain individuals. By dæmonic was meant, as I found, a mysterious power which some people possess of attracting others towards them—a power which, according to what I could gather, was somewhat related to animal magnetism, for it seemed to belong not necessarily to intellectual superiority, not to

amiability, nor to any kind of goodness, though *you*, my Josephine, have all these qualities. I can easily imagine how your schoolmistress was drawn towards you, and you need not tell me how your school-fellows were also drawn."

"They were indeed," said Josephine, "but that was because in girls' schools in America there is always a sort of elective queen whose function is to be worshipped by all the pupils. When this queen leaves the school, she is at once replaced by another queen, for an American school is the very ideal of a monarchy; it can no more exist without a queen than a bee-hive can exist without a queen bee."

"How delightful!"

"Well, from being the pet of the schoolmistress I soon developed into being the queen-bee of the school. The obedience that they gave to the schoolmistress and the governesses was always more or less partial. The scholars seemed to be continually actuated by a feeling that they were living in a republic where there was no monarch. But not so with regard to me. The caliph did not exercise a more arbitrary sway over Bagdad than I did over that school! It was not merely that everyone of my school-fellows was willing to obey my commands. They actually yearned to be commanded—asked to be commanded—as a spaniel yearns with his wistful eyes set upon his master. Their protestations of affection were unbounded. Whenever any one of the girls received from home a box of the creature comforts and luxuries which schoolgirls look forward to with such eagerness, the

contents of the box were at once laid before me to choose whatsoever I liked."

"What a wonderful school experience," said Violet, "and what a wonderful school! Do tell me more about it!"

"If I were to tell you a tithe of the instances of this insensate devotion to me I should never know where to stop," said Josephine.

"Do give me one instance—only one! You can't think how interested I am."

"Well, I will give you one. Although the living at the school was extremely good, there were certain table luxuries with which the cook did not provide us. For instance, we got neither omelettes nor new-laid eggs for breakfast, as you may imagine. Now American girls have an extraordinary *penchant* for omelettes, and in default of omelettes, for new-laid eggs. And the most coveted of all presents from home was a hamper of these delicacies. And it was not against the rules of the school that the recipients of these luxuries should have them cooked for breakfast. But as there are different degrees of newness in regard to new-laid eggs, each girl in sending her egg down to the kitchen wrote her name upon it; and of course, should she feel a special kindness towards a friend, she would write that name upon an egg; and nothing was prettier at breakfast than to see the look of pleasant surprise on a girl's face on finding a new-laid egg on the side of her plate, with her name written upon it. She would look up and down the table until her eye caught the eye of the donor, who would kiss the tips of her fingers and throw the kiss



across the table, and get another kiss by way of response."

"Ah! I like that. What a misfortune it was that I never went to school!" said Violet.

"Well," continued Josephine, "it was no uncommon experience of mine to see five or six or even seven eggs ranged around my plate, with my name upon each; and I was perfectly conscious that each donor felt amply rewarded by the kiss I flung to her!"

"But," Violet naturally interposed, "but you couldn't eat *all* these eggs. What *did* you do with them?"

"I used to take from my pocket a little stubby piece of drawing-pencil, which I carried with me, and write upon each egg the name of some one of the school girls who chanced to be without eggs and pass them down the long table; and it would not uncommonly occur that one of these recipients of my bounty to whom I sent an egg, because she had not one before her, was a girl who had written my name upon her very last egg, and was without one herself!"

Violet soon came to know that Josephine's unusual beauty was of the creole type, for although her friend never directly admitted that there was an admixture of African blood in her veins, in her talks with Violet her intense sensitivity in this respect made the fact only too manifest.

It was apparent in the defiant expression that Violet noticed at times upon the strongly emotional face. This puzzled her at first, but she came to

understand the look when she realised the resentment Josephine expressed in regard to racial animosity if at any time she spoke of her visits to various countries throughout Europe and Asia, and America most of all.

It was in a reference to Dumas that she first betrayed her ill-feeling for her own people.

"You seem very fond of Dumas," Josephine had said, as she lifted from the table one of the yellow volumes—the first volume of 'Monte Cristo'—that Violet had been reading.

"Yes," said Violet, "perhaps I ought not to confess it, but he is my favourite novelist. I have read 'Monte Cristo' more than once."

"And why ought you not to confess it?"

"Because, judging from the little I have read about novelists, he is considered to be quite a second-rate writer. What do *you* think of him?"

"Oh!" said Josephine, "I am perhaps scarcely a fair judge."

"I don't quite follow you," said Violet.

"I don't think you do," said Josephine with a quaint smile, "so let me tell you that I think Dumas the greatest writer of the century."

"Well, really," said Violet, "you quite startle me. You can hardly expect me to go quite so far as that."

"No, not quite so far," said Josephine, "but you will admit, I think, that Dumas is a great fountain of imagination and invention, from whom story-tellers of pure Caucasian blood draw inspiration without acknowledging it. The rarest of all human faculties is invention. And he seems to be the only

modern writer who can invent a story. Tell me if the story of 'The Gold Bug' would have been thought of had not Edgar Poe drunk deeply of this very volume—'Monte Cristo'? Most of the historical romances of England or America published since Dumas wrote have been influenced by his novels."

Violet looked significantly into Josephine's face. "What did you mean just now when you spoke of 'pure Caucasian blood'? " said she.

"Do you not know," said Josephine, "that Dumas was a quadroon? Do you not know that his grandmother was a pure negress?"

"Ah!" said Violet, "so she was! I had forgotten that."

A bright light lit up Josephine's eyes as she took Violet's hand between her two palms and pressed it.

"You had quite forgotten that Dumas was a man of colour! *That* is because you are an English girl, that is because you are not an American girl, that is because you do not belong to the great new race of the land of promise, that is because you do not belong to the great republic which is in the van of civilization."

"Why, Josephine, what am I to understand by that?" said Violet laughingly.

Josephine's face suddenly darkened.

"Americans love Dumas as much as you English do. Why then," said she, "did he never set his foot on American soil?"

"Why, indeed!"

"I will tell you. In America the suspicion of colour is far more terrible than the suspicion of crime. Not even the almighty dollar can wipe

away the suspicion of colour in the blood. Everything else can be condoned. It is a fact—yes, a shameful fact, my dear girl—that during the time when Alexandre Dumas was the idol of American readers he could scarcely have made his appearance on American soil without being insulted, whereas in England the fact of his having African blood in his veins was rather a point of interest than anything else! And that is one among many reasons,” she added, again pressing Violet’s hand, “that makes me like you so much.”

“Is it? Your *penchant* for English people generally is very marked.”

“Well, in a certain sense, I have a *penchant* for English people; but that is only, I think, on account of my dislike of my own people. Indeed, my antipathy towards the Americans is a sin—I confess it—a sin that I have to fight against every hour of my life.”

“Well, Josephine, I must admit I have rather thought so. I will not ask you the reason, though I think I can guess. I like them, such as I have seen, and certainly *you* ought to try your best to like them, for you are not a bit like an English girl.”

“There you are right; I ought to like my own people,” said Josephine. “I ought to dislike English people, and—well, I don’t! There is an absence of spontaneity about the English which one sees in almost every other race. I became instantly friendly with the Russians I have met. I became instantly friendly with French people, with a great number of Irish people, and a great number of Italians. But in English veins the circulation of the blood is too

slow. It seems to spoil for want of sunlight on the skin. I think it is all a matter of climate, and I think that the difference between the English and the Americans will be greater in two centuries than it is now. And yet it is the English I like and the Americans I dislike—and for a very good reason, though you must not press me to tell you what that reason is.”

On another occasion Josephine spoke with significant eloquence about the great races and the great struggles between races from immemorial time. “Whether these races and their struggles shall be known to posterity,” she said, “depends upon the chapter of accident. Do you not suppose that there have been thousands of races as great as the Maccabees, and thousands of heroic leaders as great as Judas Maccabeus. But none of them was fortunate enough to have among them a scribe to immortalise them like the scribes of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha ! ”

## CHAPTER III

### *TÊTE-À-TÊTE*

ONE afternoon Violet sat with Josephine in her studio, watching her at her easel.

"Violet," said she, "do you know what first attracted me towards you?"

"No, what was it, dear?"

"It was a pure sentiment, an artistic sentiment I suppose one might call it. I associated you—so young and so beautiful—with that spirit of antiquity with which Vesprie Towers and all its surroundings seem so rife. And that is why I'm never tired of hearing you talk about your ancestors. Do tell me some more anecdotes of their delightful eccentricities."

Violet laughed and said, "Shall I tell you something about two of my great-aunts that my father often told me about, who once lived here?"

"By all means; the more about them the better."

"They were women friends of the agglutinative kind, and you know what that means, 'kissing darlings,' and all that. Two very good women they were, beyond any doubt, but if you had had the privilege of listening to their conversation about the two baronies, as my father had, you would have learnt what two precious and beloved bores two

good women can be. I am afraid they must also be called two snobs."

"Is snobbery really a point of distinction between women?"

"One subject of exhaustless interest to them was the State balls they had attended. They seemed to remember every person they met at every State ball, and the dresses the ladies wore. The only subject of dispute between them was as to which of the two families was the most out-and-out Tory—the one great-aunt was a Vesprie; the other, my mother's aunt, was a De Courcy. On this great question they would sometimes get quite warm. Old Mrs. Vesprie violently opposed the substitution of slate for thatch on the estate, as being new-fangled and plebeian; but my mother's aunt was more conservative still. She was the last woman in England that made her coachman ride postillion fashion."

"Why was that?"

"She regarded a box-driver as an odious innovation of the *nouveaux riches*, derogatory to the dignity of so great a family."

"How very droll," said Josephine. "There is nothing in the world so comic as British snobbery, unless Yankee snobbery beats it. Snobbery has been the great factor in human civilisation. The first of the anthropoids that developed into man did it through an awakening sense of ancestry. That is to say, he was the first snob."

"They were both great genealogists," said Violet. "All their genealogical studies were confined to the family trees of which they were them-



selves the sprouts. This kind of genealogist is mostly seen, I fancy, among ladies whose relations to the tree are a good way off the stem—represented, I mean, by somewhat distant twigs, and the students are generally of the spinster persuasion. Their souls are generally supported by the knowledge that they are of the family of the patrician rose, and must, therefore, smell nearly as sweet. But somehow my two great-aunts were as fervid as any of the twiggists, though neither of them had any need to give so much attention to the family trees. My father often saw them sitting in the same room together, busy with a kind of play-work that was very fashionable then—Berlin wool-work. Did you ever see it ? ”

“ No. Do you mean sample-work ? ” said Josephine.

“ Something like that,” said Violet. “ Each stitched at a huge canvas on a frame before her, copying from a design divided into little squares, each square representing a stitch. And what do you think the designs were ? ”

“ I cannot imagine.”

“ Each was an elaborate family tree, with globes like oranges hanging from the boughs ; each globe had the name of an ancestor worked upon it. One was the Vesprie tree, the other the De Courcy tree. Each devoted herself to the study of her own family-tree first, and, secondly, to the family tree of the other. Every now and then each friend would go across the room to look at the other’s tree, and shed over its branches the sunshine of her sympathetic smiles, and then agglutinate. Each of the artists

had a little Chinese table beside her, and on it lay the pedigree-book of her family."

Josephine looked with amusement into Violet's face.

"In those good old days when your two delightful rank-worshipping aunts were young, and doubtless very handsome, to get into society was no easy matter. I mean of course *real* society, not the modern thing that is always spelt with a big *S*."

"That's true. My two rank-worshipping aunts, as you call them," said Violet laughing, "would often talk about Almack's; they told me some remarkable anecdotes about the extraordinary exclusiveness of the sets connected with that famous place. Things have indeed changed!"

"Changed? Why, nothing is easier than to get into society nowadays," said Josephine. "All you have to do is to have more money than other people, or to do some amusing thing better than other people can do it. That is the *passe-partout*. Besides," added Josephine, "it's far easier, you know, for an American girl without antecedents to get into society than for an English girl to do so. An American is just an American, but an English girl is primarily supposed to belong to some set. It has greatly amused me to study the manners and customs of this section of English life; and when, a year or two ago at the Academy, one of my pictures chanced to be the rage, I determined just out of pure fun to play the American 'Society Woman,' and what's more, I managed to succeed."

"I've often wondered how it chanced that you,

an American, were so well acquainted with English society," said Violet.

"I began by renting a good-sized house in Portman Square. I had, of course, an elderly artistic chaperon who went everywhere with me."

"Do tell me all about it! What a happy day it was when I first came to know you!"

"That Academy picture of mine," said Josephine, "which I called 'The Sunrise at Stonehenge,' became more and more famous, so I determined not to sell it. I cancelled the price in the Academy book. Then several of the picture dealers approached me and offered me fabulous sums; but as I knew they meant to exhibit it and then to engrave it, and make a lot of money out of me, I determined to do all that myself and afterwards sell it. Wasn't that clever!"

"Yes, indeed! Who could have believed," said Violet, "that you were such a magnificent woman of business? And did you succeed in your project?"

"Succeed?" said Josephine. "I refuse to tell anybody how much I made by exhibitions, and the engravings, and the final sale of the picture, fearing it would get talked about and reach the ears of the income-tax sharks! Well, the sale of my 'Sunrise at Stonehenge,' let me tell you, brought more orders than I could have executed in half a century."

"Did you execute any of the orders?"

"Yes, a few, not many," said Josephine. "Society took up so much of my time. For when I had got my house in Portman Square snugly completed, I began to ask myself what sort of an

entertainment I should begin with. Should I give a dinner or a ball, or a few select luncheons? I couldn't give a garden party because I had no garden. I was not long in deciding. I had formed the acquaintance of all the musical people and all the theatrical people of any note in London. I found that an easy thing to do! I determined to give an evening musical party. Musical people have the character of being mercenary, and mercenary they are. And why not? But *I* was a fellow-artist, and they liked me; and I was easily able to give the most attractive musical party that had been given during the season. Only at Buckingham Palace itself had there been a musical party that could be compared to it!"

"You must have become quite famous; and now," said Violet, "in this quiet retreat you are already forgotten."

"Yes, that's the way with society, of course. That season—*my* season—all the society journals and most of the daily newspapers wrote about me, for everybody was talking about me. In fact, my *coup d'éclat* was crowned with success! But this *soirée* was only an introduction to my *great stroke*—my second *soirée*. I had only to mention the fact to a newspaper man that my second musical reception was coming off for all London to be put into a fluster about it."

"Of course you must have been too much occupied with society," said Violet, "to give serious thought to art."

"Yes, indeed! I neglected my work terribly," said Josephine, "and what is even worse, I became

wildly reckless in my expenditure. It is a matter of surprise to me that I did not get into the bankruptcy court! Shall I tell you what was the programme of my day from the middle of June to the end of the season? "

" Pray do," said Violet.

" Well, the first thing in the morning was my ride in the park. Then I used to go out to luncheon, and then I used to fulfil some afternoon engagement such as a croquet party in the garden of one of my new acquaintances, or perhaps in one of the big squares, or else take a drive in a friend's carriage in Hyde Park."

" Ah, I wonder if I ever saw you there. It was my favourite resort, as I've often told you."

" By the time I got home to Portman Square," Josephine went rambling on, " it was time to dress for dinner. A dinner was my great field of display; my rivals then were not as a rule the unmarried girls, but the frisky young matrons. My competition with them was a very easy affair. The reason why they are so successful with men is that the nincompoops of society can flirt with them, or pretend to flirt with them, and run no risks of entanglements. If it was not for this you don't suppose *they* would stand any chance against the pretty unmarried girls? For the frisky matron as a rule is stupid and uninteresting. It is this stupidity that makes them frisky. An unmarried girl, of course, may be stupid, but she may be very bright. Now I, an American and an artist, have nobody to trouble himself or herself as to the

matter of intentions ; and, besides, I am not considered stupid. And as for the balls——”

And then she went on to describe in graphic detail the endless balls to which she had been invited. And so the evenings would be spent, passing more swiftly and more pleasantly for Violet than any she had ever known.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOSEPHINE'S HERO

JOSEPHINE appeared on the terrace one evening, outside the open window that led into the boudoir. Stepping into the room, she discovered Violet bending in the golden lamp-light over a book. So immersed was she in her reading that Josephine had to put her hand upon Violet's shoulder to make her aware of her presence.

"I have seen you fascinated by poetry Violet," said she, "but never so absorbed before. What has so captured the bright eyes of my student?" and she reached over Violet's shoulder, and took up the volume. "Ah!" she muttered, "that poetic play, 'The Birth of an Outlaw.'"

"Yes, I came upon it this morning in looking over your books in the studio. I wonder who this 'Sherwood' is who has written this drama? It is very strange. Do you know, Josephine," said Violet, lowering her voice, "that by some extraordinary coincidence there's a scene in the play descriptive of Vesprie Towers and an incident relating to a dream that I had while I was living here alone?"

"Indeed?"



"But the story is, I can see, founded on a version of one of the old Vesprie ballads, one of the best."

"That's interesting. In order to find good romantic ballads, I've been told," said Josephine, "one must go northwards to the border and beyond as a rule. Now and again, however, the student of southern tradition does come across a fragment of a ballad which, although it has the lilt of the ballad movement that we associate with the north, has nevertheless many qualities which give it a flavour of the soil, and make it essentially unlike the northern minstrelsy. No doubt this old version of a Vesprie ballad, which you've discovered in this play, is based on one still older, but now lost."

"Of course it is," said Violet; "there is no doubt whatever about that. There is, I'm sure, quite a mass of ballads about our family, if they could only be found."

"What other ballads are there?"

"Well, there is the one about the 'Robin Hood' story, which is told in the panel pictures that you're never tired of studying, 'Robin Hood's Rescue,' you know. But this story, which the author has called 'The Birth of an Outlaw,' was always my favourite ballad, for it's about the luck of Vesprie Towers."

"Will you read it to me?" said Josephine as she took a seat at her friend's side.

"I'll read you the opening scene," said Violet. "That's the one in which the dream is introduced—*my* dream, I mean."

And she began to read:—

## "ACT I. SCENE I.

'THE BIRTH OF AN OUTLAW.'

'Wildwood Luck shall never die  
While the rainbow in the sky  
Makes a rainbow in the water  
For a sign to son or daughter.'

ANCIENT LOCAL SAW.

*Characters.*

RALPH—a man-at-arms—a friend of Amelotte Wildwood's brother, unknown to Amelotte. Until he overheard her speak heedlessly some scornful words of his low birth, he was secretly in love with Amelotte.

AMELOTTE—a beautiful girl—the last representative of the ancient Wildwood family, to whom, if to any body, must come the Luck of Wildwood Towers.

*Scene.*

A panelled room in a wing of Wildwood Towers. Amelotte, alone, sitting in an antique armchair, has fallen asleep. Before her on the table is a topaz sparkling in the lamplight.

RALPH (*entering the room and starting back in surprise on seeing AMELOTTE*).

The lovely face I loved thrown back in sleep—  
The lamplight flushing all the silken skin,  
The brow of pearl whose sunny tresses sweep  
Adown the throat and neck and lifted chin—  
The lips Love shaped for his own lips to press,  
Then saw them grow to such cold haughtiness  
That he himself, though longing to caress,  
Has never dared to win.

(*While he stands gazing at her the proud expression on her mouth relaxes, and then fades away, and she smiles.*)

RALPH (*drawing nearer*).

'The Luck of Wildwood Towers,' your Prince of Elves  
Whose mirrored rainbow guards the Wildwood girls  
(Though, from of old, they well could guard themselves)  
Is surely hovering o'er these golden curls—  
Is bringing you that wild old Wildwood dream,  
Making you smile with lips and teeth that seem  
To open like a rose whose petals gleam  
Half hiding dewdrop pearls.

AMELOTTE (*talking in her sleep*).

'Tis the spirit brings that glow  
Smiling where the skies were dark,  
Bends the many-coloured bow  
O'er the oak, the wood, the park,  
Wakes the skylark's merry strain  
As he mounts through drops of rain—  
Makes the river glitter once again  
With the mirrored arc,  
In the water, amber-tinted  
By the stain of fallen leaves  
Blown from sward the leaves have printed  
With the hues the autumn weaves,  
Gleams the mirror'd bow of love,  
Painted from the one above,  
Where the river, wrapt in dreams thereof,  
Lingers and receives.

RALPH.

Where moonbeams glimmer through the panes of glass  
And mingle with the lamplight's rosy bloom,  
You dream of 'Wildwood' Oak and leaves and grass  
And mirrored rainbows!—in this panelled room!  
Beneath that oak you stand in that same place  
Where I have seen you oft when trying to trace  
The Wildwood elf in gossamer-opal lace  
Outspread on Autumn's loom.

AMELOTTE (*her lips shaping themselves in her sleep to a kiss*).

Faintly, sweetly in the water,  
 Like a half-forgotten bliss,  
 Gleams for me, the ' Wildwood daughter,'  
 What I long'd for, pined for—this—  
 This sweet bow, the happy sign  
 Of the joy that will be mine !  
 ' Wildwood Luck,' while fairy colours shine,  
 Claims me by the kiss.

RALPH.

Now, Sleeping Beauty, was it Fate or Chance—  
 My fœmen both !—that led my footsteps here,  
 Where, like that Princess, daughter of old Romance  
 Imprisoned in the Fairies' magic sphere,  
 You sit and dream and see the sought-for sight  
 Your fancy fashions for your heart's delight ?  
 What Powers have brought Love's pallid face to-night ?  
 Dead Love more pale than Fear !  
 What Powers have brought you this unhonoured boy  
 Who loved you, spite of Fate and Wildwood creed—  
 Yea, spite of all, and asked no sweeter joy  
 For his own passionate heart's divinest meed  
 Than just to love you—just to stand apart  
 And love you, Lady, you whose heedless dart,  
 Careless of what it wounded, slew his heart—  
 Ah, left it dead indeed !  
 While you were yearning for the spirit who brings  
 The mirrored bow—' The Luck of Wildwood Towers,'  
 How *should* you dream of me who took the stings  
 Of playful scorn to spoil my lonely hours ?  
 All things must yield to fate—must yield at last,  
 Even Amelotte's lips must yield—though guarded fast  
 From low-born lips—held safe by guardian caste !—  
 Fate brought me to these flowers.

(*He leans forward over the table and touches her lips*

*with his own. Then seeing that her eyes open, he springs away and conceals himself behind the knight's armour.)*

AMELOTTE (*awakening*).

What is this mysterious thrill ?

Sleep seems wearing Love's warm wings :

Do I wake, or am I still

Mingled with ethereal things ?

Did I hear and did I see

One who sighed, who gazed at me,

While the moon's rare music seemed to be

Struck from fairy strings ?

All a dream ! Ah, well ! they say

We can make our dreams come true

If—before the arid day

Dries them up like morning dew—

We can seize them, own them ours ;

Then they grow to fairy bowers.

All a dream ! And yet through Wildwood Towers

Ev'n the air seems new.

Did I stand in Oaken Grove

Where the deer had come to browse ?

Did a rainbow shine above

Wildwood Oak and tinge the boughs ?

Did the ferns and leaves and stems

Down the deer park shine like gems—

Shine like autumn's glittering diadems

Woven for elfin brows ?

Spring seemed gone and summer faded,

Autumn wore so sunny a glow

That the birds seemed half persuaded

June was back, with flowers in blow.

Trees and hedges, bowers and bushes,

Woke with June's own jays and thrushes !

Every warbler in the reeds and rushes

Hailed the glittering bow,

Till a voice said, ' In the river

See the mirrored bow grow dim ;

When the stream begins to quiver  
It will fade or lose a limb.  
Ere the voice had left my side,  
Love's reflected rainbow died,  
And I woke, for some one near me sighed :  
Let me think of him.

*(Starting up.)*

That fond face which seemed, even now,  
Bending o'er me when I woke—  
That soft light upon the brow—  
Those wide eyes whose deep lights spoke  
Words of love—'twas love for me !—  
'Tis the face I yearned to see—  
'Tis the Luck of Wildwood Towers, and he  
Waits beneath the Oak. . . ."

She paused and looked with dreamy, wondering eyes into Josephine's face.

"Who can he be?" said she. "Who can this 'Sherwood' be?"

"My hero."

"Your hero?" said Violet with a quick glance of inquiry.

"Yes. The man—the sailor we've often talked about—who saved my life."

"Ah! Do tell me the story again of that brave young fellow—why do you smile?"

"If I have told you that story once, Violet, I have told it to you a dozen times. And now you want to hear it all over again!"

Josephine, however, needed no further persuasion, but at once launched into a long and eloquent description of a journey from Mexico to Marseilles, telling of how she fell overboard during the voyage

and how a man on board—a sailor—sprang into a rough sea and saved her from drowning.

“Josephine,” Violet confessed, when she had finished her recital, “I am in love with a dream! I am in love with that heroic rescuer of yours.”

“Yes,” said Josephine, “I have already perceived it. You need not confess that.”

“In telling me your story, Josephine,” said Violet, “you have told me more than you intended to tell.”

“And what is that?”

“You have told me how deeply *you* love this heroic seaman. And no wonder—no wonder! And I frankly own that you are right about me. Yes, I have fairly fallen in love with him myself. From my childhood,” said Violet, “I have been in love with the heroic side of man as seen in the Chevalier de Bayard, Sir Philip Sidney and the Cid. My brother’s book about them was our favourite reading. When I was living here alone, in my island of poverty, I dreamt that such men could still be found—I mean, found in the class into which I was born! When I was brought into contact with the other classes, with the mean little shopkeepers of Lambeth, and with the very *prolétaire* of the slums—when I was shocked by the meanness and the squalor of those forms of life—I used to say to myself, ‘If I could only be brought into contact with England’s patriciate—with those who inherit the traditions of honour—with the Sidneys and with men of that temper, I should be content.’”

“Then you do not think,” said Josephine, “that



there are now any men of the Bayard and Sidney type ? ”

“ How can there possibly be ? ” said Violet. “ I am proud of the soldier who endangers his life not in the quest of promotion, but simply from a sense of duty ! But, when he comes back from the wars, what does he do ? He is content, as you well know—if he belongs to society—to take up his old place. He is content to be ‘ hail-fellow-well-met ’ with the vulgar money-grubs whose fortunes are made by these wars. The soldier is *sans peur*—but not *sans reproche*. He has the courage of Bayard, the courage of Sidney, the courage of the Cid, but there his nobility of temper ends, the self-reverence of the old *régime* is gone. He is ready to attend a function given by the vulgarest speculator on the Stock Exchange or the vulgarest gold digger from Australia, as vulgar and as disreputable as that drunken pugilist, poor Molly’s father, Jerry Redwood ! ”

“ You are very severe,” said Josephine with sudden emotion. “ I—I had no idea you took things quite so seriously as that ! And—and I am sorry for it.”

“ Why sorry, Josephine ? ”

“ Because in the end, you know, you will have to marry one of these modern heroes.”

“ I shall never marry,” said Violet.

There was a short silence between them. Both seemed deep in thought.

“ Come upstairs to the studio,” said Josephine at last. “ I want to show you a portrait that I finished painting to-day.”

And she took up the lamp and went out with the light raised above her head to show the way.

"Now, my dear," said Josephine with a brightness in her manner that seemed somewhat assumed, "I want you to take your place in the antique arm-chair and listen to me! And first of all let me confess that I chose this 'panelled room,' as the poet calls it, as my studio when I came here through discovering that it was the room described in the scene you have just been reading from 'The Birth of an Outlaw.'"

"It is the room—all complete! The author must have been here."

"Of course! All complete. Yes, including even the armoured knight!" said Josephine.

She walked towards her easel over which a cloth had been thrown and placed her hand upon it, as though about to remove the covering. Suddenly she paused and looked at Violet.

"The man who wrote that poetic play—the man about whom we have so often talked, and whom I call my hero—chose 'Sherwood,' as you have surmised, merely as his *nom de plume*. I will perhaps tell you his real name presently."

"An ideal poet, indeed!" said Violet. "But where is he now? Not dead, I hope?"

"Ah! that's the distressing sequel to the story about my hero that I never told you. A seaman of great experience, his chief ambition was to become an explorer, and he started from London, where I last saw him, to join an exploring party at Sydney. How strong and how full of enthusiasm he looked!—the strongest and handsomest man in the party,

I was told. Some six months after that meeting between us in London, a paragraph, taken from an Australian journal, appeared in the London newspapers. I well remember the words of that brief paragraph."

"What were they?"

" 'We regret to read in an Australian paper that the exploring expedition under Speckgrifts, to survey the sources of the Fly River, is lost. It is said that every member of the expedition has been massacred by the natives.' "

"How very sad!"

"Yes, my dear, the saddest experience in my life," said Josephine with evident emotion. "I think, had he lived, he would have made a great name, not merely as an explorer, but as a poet. His play, 'The Birth of an Outlaw,' was published two years ago by a bookseller in Melbourne, and attracted some attention. And now," she added, lifting the cloth from the easel, and holding up the lamp, "come and look at the portrait of our hero, upon which I have been at work ever since I came to Vesprie Towers, ever since I set up my studio in this old panelled room!"

Violet rose from the antique armchair and stepped eagerly forward.

It was the portrait of a weather-beaten seaman in sailor's dress. No sooner had Violet's eyes rested upon it than she uttered a low, distressful cry.

"Oh, Josephine!" she said, scarcely above a whisper, her hand suddenly pressed on her friend's arm. "It's Molly's brother!"

Josephine put down her lamp and then turning to Violet she said—

“You’ve not forgotten his face?”

“No, I’ve not forgotten. He’s the man I once told you about, Josephine, when we were talking one day about my solitary life at Vesprie Towers in the old times.”

“Is it possible? Is this the hero who, unknown and unseen, watched over you for months when you lived here alone?”

“Yes.”

“The mysterious guardian who lit your fire, and did all those other menial services for you,—who watched over the lonely girl and ministered to her wants?”

“Yes, Martin Redwood,” said Violet. “But why did you never tell me that that was the name of your hero?”

“Ah! Why indeed?” said Josephine.

## CHAPTER V

### A NIGHT UNDER THE STARS

AFTER that night in the studio when Josephine showed Violet her portrait of their "hero," Martin Redwood's name was never mentioned. By tacit consent the subject was avoided, though it was evident that the incident had tended to draw the two girls towards each other, if possible, more closely still.

Otherwise their ideal life at Vesprie Towers went on as hitherto with no apparent contemplation, on Violet's part at least, that there was the remotest possibility of its coming to a close. Whether it was that she never ceased to entertain an unbounded faith in the Vesprie luck, or whatever the cause might be, she took no more thought of the morrow during these enchanting days than she had done when living at Vesprie Towers in her childhood.

One sultry summer evening Violet sauntered out into the park towards a wooded spot where her hammock was slung, under the wide-spreading branches of a huge beech. She was so frequently wont to rest here curled up on her *al fresco* couch late into the night, that no one ever thought of disturbing her, Josephine least of all—knowing her so well as a "child of the open air," not even when, as occasionally happened, she was overtaken by sleep,

and failed to make her appearance until long after the usual breakfast hour.

On this particular evening she lay in her hammock with a feeling of perfect lassitude creeping over her senses. It was not a feeling of drowsiness; indeed, she had seldom felt more wakeful than now.

It was a still, cloudless night, and she lay gazing up between the branches into the starlit sky, in that meditative mood which might have been called bliss and might have been called pain, so full was it of the two senses blended into one.

Save for the occasional barking of some dog in the distant town of Thornton, or the song of a nightingale, or the call of a drowsy partridge, the entire park was filled with the most divine of all music, the night's music of silence.

"How is it that Keats," thought Violet, "who never spent a night under the stars, as I am spending it, was able to write words so entirely descriptive of the music of silence?"

"'Heard melodies are sweet; but those unheard  
Are sweeter.'"

The footfall of the furred things among the vegetation, the fluttering wings of the night insects as they flew across her face, were the only sounds that broke the unheard melodies that the bodily ear can hear only when the night has awakened the inner ear of the soul.

And then the breath of the flowers, the beloved wild flowers, of Vesprie park, that seemed to know her as intimately as they knew her in the days

that now seemed years and years ago ! From old, grateful experiences, when the scent was wafted in at her bedroom window, she knew that exquisite night perfume and all its delights. Sweet as is the breath of all wild flowers during the day, she knew from those reminiscences how enormously more sweet was their fragrance in the night time. And she knew why. The mystic science of childhood had taught her that it was because the blossoms were asleep and sunk in perfumed dreams such as waking flowers do not know.

And now an owl settled silently upon a bush not far from her. The bird apparently did not heed Violet. And then, after a while, she heard a weird sound which she knew well, a sound the owl makes when hunger is beginning to tease her stomach, and then she saw the ghostly owner of the yellow eyes swoop down, silent as a snowflake, but swift as lightning from the bush upon which it had been waiting so patiently and seize upon its prey, a poor little field mouse, and she could hardly suppress a cry of pain at the sight.

It somehow reminded her forcibly of her own terrible experiences in that struggle for life through which she had passed ; it brought up a vivid mental vision of the hard times with Molly Redwood and the times that had proved, if that were possible, harder still when those tragic moments of despair had possessed her after Molly was gone, and she had no one to think about, nothing but her own sad and desolate plight.

Violet began to grow drowsy, at last, as the night



drew on apace, as more and more masterful grew the glorious epic of stars above her, and sweeter and sweeter grew the dreamy thoughts of her early days, blotting out all the suffering that had intervened until at last the memories of childhood and the memories of these later days since her return to Vesprie Towers, blended into one tide of reminiscent blissfulness. Midnight struck from the village church soothingly, and then she fell asleep, if the condition into which her senses sank can be called sleep, a condition in which the thoughts and emotions of the waking state are mingled in the recurrent waves of a shoreless ocean of dreams. At first no distinct image of anything or any person came to her, but the whole park seemed, so to speak, charged with a feeling that some one was somewhere near her. And presently, a little distance from her, where the glistening leaves of the trees mingled with the light of the stars, she saw in shadowy outline the face of the man she had seen at Stratford Fair, the young sailor who had lifted his hand to protect her on that memorable night in the streets of London, saw every feature, saw his lips move, and then she heard a voice that seemed to come from afar and yet was mingled with the voices of the nightingales from the park trees, as the picture of the face was mingled with the foliage and the stars. Then more musical than even the nightingales' songs was that voice. It was repeating in a low tone the same words that she knew so well, words that she had heard so often in her dreams and ever since she was a child:—

“Vesprie luck shall never die  
While the rainbow in the sky  
Makes a rainbow in the water  
For a sign to son or daughter.”

And now the vision in the dream that had come to her in Lawrie's room upon that moonlight night, the night before she left Vesprie Towers, rose up before her, causing her an inexpressible sense of happiness.

A strange and resistless magnetic force impelled her to rise from her pillows ; slowly she slid down out of her hammock and advanced through the ferns towards the figure standing motionless before her in the diminishing light of the stars, for now in the lower sky faint indications were apparent of the coming dawn.

If she had had a belief in the supernatural when living among the spirits of her ancestors in the lonely nights at Vesprie Towers, the belief did not rouse any sense of fear now. She stepped forward unhesitatingly and looked more closely into the sailor's face.

“If I am not dreaming,” said she in a low, measured and awe-stricken voice, “you are Martin Redwood.”

“Yes, I am Martin Redwood,” was the response.

“I should have known you by your likeness to Molly—your poor sister Molly—if I had never seen you before. But I thought I must be dreaming because,” said Violet, “because Miss Thirlwell and everyone—as she told me—had been led to believe that you were dead.”

You are not dreaming, Miss Vesprie,” said he.

"The rumour that I had met with my death was spread far and wide. But, as you see, I escaped. With the greatest difficulty, after endless hardships, I reached Australia, and the moment I could get employed as mate on board a homeward-bound steamer I set sail for England."

Violet looked at him with a sudden growth of interest.

"The news of your safe return," said she, "will delight Miss Thirlwell beyond words. She has spoken of you—told me all about your brave action at sea when you saved her life—many a time. She will appreciate more than I can express to you this visit to her at Vesprie Towers."

"I was coming to see her," said Redwood, "last evening. I wandered into the park just before sunset. I am afraid I was tempted to linger rather longer than I had any right to do on my way towards the house. I sat down among the ferns. And then, while seated there, the night being so enchanting, I was tempted to linger on and on, and at last I thought I would postpone my visit to the Towers until the morning."

Violet regarded him with a look of genuine surprise.

"Is it possible that you have been resting under these trees all through the night?"

"Yes, where I am standing now," said he, "all through the night."

The thought flashed across Violet's mind, "Has he been watching over me in my sleep, as he watched over me in former days when I was living here alone—alone in Vesprie Towers?"

"But I came," Martin Redwood went on—"I came here, Miss Vesprie, with the hope of seeing you scarcely less than with the hope of seeing Miss Thirlwell. For I heard from Mr. Walton, upon whom I called on the very day I reached London, that I should find you at your old home."

"You—came—to see—me?"

"Yes. But pray let me explain," said he, noticing a startled note in the tone of Violet's voice. "When I heard from Mr. Walton all about your kindness to my sister Molly, I felt that I must see you, and thank you from my heart for what you had done. Do not misunderstand me. If I had not learnt that you were here—back once more at Vesprie Towers—where it fills me with unspeakable delight to find you, I should not have rested day or night until I had got tidings of you and told you of my heartfelt thankfulness. The thought of all you had done for Molly brought a gleam of happiness over my poor mother's last hour."

He held out his hand.

"Good-bye!" said he in a broken voice. "I won't attempt to express my gratitude. It's beyond the power of words. Good-bye!"

Violet took the hand he held out to her, and to his amazement pressed it to her lips.

"Your gratitude to me!" said she. "Your gratitude! You owe me none. It is I who have to thank you. Do you think I've forgotten the old days when I was a little wayward girl and you were Lawrie's chosen friend? No day ever passed without our talking together about you! Do you think I've forgotten that while leading my lonely

life in Vesprie Towers, it was you who, without word or sign, watched over me, protecting me from the perils of the night to which I might have been exposed ? ”

“ I took your brother’s place, Miss Vesprie, as far as I could. There was no merit in that,” Redwood interjected.

“ And still more,” Violet went on, not heeding his words, “ still more, do you think I’ve forgotten that night on the streets of London when you came to my aid ? I have never forgiven myself for running away in that cowardly fashion, without a word, without a single word expressing all I felt towards you for what you had done. You must have thought me utterly heartless. How can I expect you to forgive me ? ”

“ Heartless, Miss Vesprie ? ” cried Redwood. “ Such a thought never crossed my mind ! Why, your goodness to Molly proves—if proof were needed—that no one ever had a kinder heart than you have.”

“ How can you think that ? Anyone, under the circumstances, would have done what I did. But you do not know,” said Violet, “ no one ever will know, what I owe to Molly.”

“ What you owe to Molly ? ” echoed Redwood in an undertone.

“ Yes, what I owe to your sister Molly,” said Violet. “ Without her, without that loving, sweet-natured girl who came into my life in those wretched poverty-stricken days, I should have lost all courage, my very existence would have been unendurable. I should have broken down and—and

died. But in my love and thoughtfulness for Molly—for I soon learnt to love her—life seemed worth living, for I had something to live for, someone whose smile of welcome when I returned at night to our poor garret home, came upon me like a gleam of sunshine, and all the dark shadows around us seemed to disappear. Do not speak to me of gratitude. I deserve none for what I have done. In my love for Molly—in her love for me—I had my full reward.”

For a moment Martin Redwood seemed too deeply overpowered by Violet’s words to speak to her. At last he said,—

“Did she—did Molly ever mention my name?”

Violet gave a sudden start and exclaimed, “Ah! how thoughtless of me! In her last moments she sent a message to you.”

“To me!” said Martin; “sent a message to me through you!”

“Yes. When Molly was dying—not until then—she told me who she was, and she asked me, should I ever chance to meet you, to give you the photograph of yourself that you gave her when you last saw her, before going to sea. Poor Molly! It was the only thing she possessed.”

With a suppressed eagerness in his look and in his tone, Martin said,—

“Have you—by any chance—kept it?”

“Kept it! I would not have parted with it for the world,” said Violet.

“I hope, if you still wish to keep it, I mean for Molly’s sake——”

“May I—may I keep it? Oh, thank you, thank

you! It's my one souvenir of Molly. There's nothing I value so much—nothing—unless it be my rainbow topaz, the luck of Vesprie Towers."

And again, with a sudden impulse she held out her hand—"Thank you!"

He took the outstretched hand and bending over it pressed it to his lips.

"Good-bye!" said he, in a broken voice. "Good-bye!"

And he turned away with a lingering step, out of the shadows of the foliage overhead into the dawning light.

Violet stood for a while with her eyes bent upon the retreating figure, and a strange emotion came over her as Martin presently disappeared from sight among the trees.



## CHAPTER VI

### JOAN REDWOOD'S BEQUEST

THE sun had not yet appeared above the horizon when Violet reached the Towers. The household showed no sign of being astir. On gaining her bedroom a sense of weariness, so unusual with her in the early morning, tempted her to sink down upon her bed ; and in spite of the contending emotions that were disturbing her mind, she soon fell into a sound and dreamless sleep.

It was late when she awoke. Her first thought, as she sprang from her bed, was to look for Josephine.

The startling news that she had to communicate, the news that Martin Redwood was alive, and that she had spoken to him in Vesprie woods, must be broken to her friend without a moment's delay.

Then came the thought, Would Josephine, when told in detail the circumstances of the meeting with Martin Redwood, believe that such an incident was more than a vision that had come to her while dreaming at midnight in her hammock under the stars—a dream so vivid, as some of her waking dreams had been, that it had seemed at the time, and, indeed, still seemed to her to have actually occurred ?

Violet, however, was by no means deterred by

any such thought, as she hastened downstairs to Josephine's room. But Josephine was nowhere to be found in the house; and presently Violet learnt from the servant, whom she met on her way to the boudoir with her breakfast tray, that her friend had gone out into the park more than an hour ago.

Violet, whose healthy appetite lost nothing of its keenness from a night under the stars, sat down at the table and enjoyed her morning meal as thoroughly as she had ever done in the days when she cooked her own repast while living here alone. She was healthy, physically no less than mentally. The romance of life had for her its distressful side, for Violet had suffered more than most women; and yet no one ever lived who had gained more pleasure out of the joy that came from the mere sense of existence.

She was too eager to find Josephine, however, to linger long over her breakfast, and was soon hurrying out through the woods, taking the path that led to Josephine's favourite spot near the mere.

After searching for half an hour or more the murmur of voices close at hand suddenly reached her.

She stopped and stood quite motionless, a listening look in her eyes, keen with excitement. Then she moved with a soft tread towards the spot from whence the sound of the voices seemed to come.

"You went direct to Mr. Walton's office when you reached London?"

It was Josephine who spoke ; Violet recognized her voice at once.

“ Yes, and his first remark when, as I’ve told you, he had persuaded himself that he was looking upon the real, live Martin Redwood was, ‘ I’m sorry to inform you, my dear sir, that I’ve got very bad news to break to you with regard to your mother’s estate. Fully believing that you were dead, she left in her last will everything to a lady for whom she had reason to feel the sincerest gratitude.’ ”

“ Yes, everything,” said Josephine.

“ Of course, Mr. Walton, in his dry, professional way, went on to express his sympathy, declaring that it was a very hard case, that he had never met with a harder case in all his long professional experience. And when he gathered from my remarks that I had no private means—nothing beyond the money I might earn as a sailor, he began to hint that the lady who had come into this rich estate was a very generous lady, and would be the first to recognise that she had inherited a property to which *I* had—morally, not *legally*, of course—an undoubted claim. And, he added, if I would permit him to write to her he would make it his business to put the circumstances of the case in detail before her. He further added that although it was not for a lawyer to commit himself in any way to an opinion, he had reason to believe that the lady—the sole legatee—would act towards him with a liberality that would possibly surprise him. I was naturally curious to know the lady’s name, and I hastened to put the question.”

"Dear friend!" Violet heard Josephine murmur, "Is it possible you didn't know—that you had not even learnt the lady's name?"

"How could I?" said Redwood, "how could I? And when he told me who it was, when he said 'the lady's name is Violet Vesprie,' I thought I must be going crazed—that I must still be suffering from the sunstroke I got on Thursday Island a year ago."

"Poor fellow!" Josephine said, in a scarcely audible voice. "I wish I had known you were in London. I would have broken all this news to you, and more gently, perhaps, than Mr. Walton would seem to have done. But tell me. Did he make it clear to you that Violet Vesprie had not only inherited all your mother's wealth, but that she was the owner—the indisputable owner—of Vesprie Towers?"

Violet gave an involuntary start, and grasped the branch of a tree convulsively. An hysterical cry rose to her lips.

The owner of Vesprie Towers!

It was true then—all true! That mysterious power of which her father had so often spoken existed after all! It was no mere fairy tale. It was the luck of the Vespries. That heirloom—the rainbow topaz, which she had never parted with throughout all those days of indigence and desolation—had prevented Vesprie Towers and the Vesprie lands from passing out of the family!

Violet stepped hastily, but without a sound, closer to the spot where Martin Redwood and Josephine were conversing. If the thought crossed her mind that she was an eavesdropper—that she

had no right to listen to another word of all this confidential talk between those two friends—the impulse to approach nearer to them was one she felt that she had not the strength to resist.

She peered eagerly between the branches, with their thick screen of foliage, her lips parted—peered with a fully roused interest in the scene that was going on in the shady glade within a few feet from the place of her concealment.

There, upon a moss-covered bank, was Josephine, reclining beside Martin Redwood, who sat gazing straight before him like one staring vacantly into space, his handsome features expressive of the distress with which he was relating the painful details of the interview that had taken place so recently between the lawyer, John Walton, and himself.

“My one desire now,” he was saying, “was that Miss Vesprie should not know but that I had shared the fate of my venturesome comrades. I asked Mr. Walton to keep the fact of my escape from captivity secret as far as possible. I told him that I intended to resume my sailor’s life and pass the rest of my days in search of wild adventure, and strive, as I had striven before, to forget the past. But when—when I came to learn from him all that Miss Vesprie had done for my sister Molly, I felt an irresistible desire to see her and express to her my boundless gratitude. I have seen her, seen her once more, as I’ve told you. She is still ignorant of the fact that she is the owner of Vesprie Towers. When Mr. Walton makes all the truth known to her, I shall be thousands of miles away.”

For a while there was silence between them.

"I suppose," said Josephine, "Mr. Walton felt it to be his duty to tell you that before your mother realised all that Violet Vesprie had done for Molly, she resolved to instate you here, at Vesprie Towers."

"Yes, the rumour of my being killed had not reached her then; she was expecting every day to hear from me. She thought of instating me here—as the master of Vesprie Towers—to satisfy her craving to be revenged on Miss Vesprie. She had for years nourished a deep prejudice, as I've often told you, against the Vesprie family. She was stung almost to madness by their proud attitude towards people of her own class of life. It was the most insensate scheme of revenge ever conceived. Miss Vesprie's very natural resentment at being drawn into the osier-peeler's game at that memorable fete increased her prejudice against the Vespries."

"Yes, yes—class hatred," Josephine interposed, in a low meditative tone.

"Her resentment," Martin went on, "developed into a kind of mania. I'm sorry to say it of my poor mother, but she saw a chance of having her revenge, as she called it, by purchasing the Towers. She seized it. She took possession of this ancestral house of the Vesprie family. But at the moment of completing the purchase of the Towers through Mr. Walton, she heard of Miss Vesprie's unexampled kindness to Molly."

"Yes, my dear friend, and the discovery changed her—changed her very nature!"

"More than that, Miss Thirlwell—more than



that ! She was stricken with remorse ; never, Mr. Walton assured me, had he seen such grief as my poor mother suffered when she found how deeply she had wronged the best and truest friend that Molly had ever known. It was pitiable—most pitiable ! But she did all that could be done to right her wrong. She made a fresh will, settling everything, Vesprie Towers and half a million of money, on the beautiful, sweet-natured girl ; for her bitter hatred had been transformed into a sense of love and gratitude never surpassed.”

“ I believe it,” said Josephine. “ Do you know, dear friend, that I almost think, if your mother had only found Violet Vesprie before she died, her end would have been comparatively happy, in spite of all her distress at the loss of Molly and the dreadful false news of your assassination.”

“ Yes, I’ve no doubt of it,” said Martin, “ no doubt whatever. Mr. Walton, who acted, as I’m forced to admit, more like a friend than a man of business in his conduct towards my mother during her last days, was quite of that opinion.”

“ Yes, he was indeed a friend ! I think there never was a kinder hearted man.”

Redwood’s face suddenly darkened. “ I can’t, I regret to say, agree with you,” said he. “ In one matter—and no small matter, let me assure you—he showed great want of heart.”

“ In reference to your mother ? Surely not ! ”

“ No, in reference to Miss Vesprie.”

“ How so ? ”

“ I will tell you ! One of the first questions I



put to Mr. Walton at our interview was as to what took place between him and the lady of Vesprie Towers when he called upon her and gave her formal notice that she must quit the home of her ancestors, and go out into the world without money or friends. He related every detail of his talk with her on that heartrending occasion, how he told her of Mr. Brandon's death and the instructions he had received from the legatee to put up the estate for sale. He told me, indeed, all that passed between them, and seriously affirmed that he was distressed at seeing Miss Vesprie's grief."

"I don't doubt it," said Josephine. "It was a situation that must have affected him very deeply."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. How can you question it?"

Redwood's eyes flashed with anger.

"Now, Miss Thirlwell, let me ask you, what man of real heart—with a spark of dramatic imagination—would have let the lady of Vesprie Towers leave the home that was part of her very life without making it his business to enquire what the young lady was going to do, where and how she intended to live when thrown upon the world, destitute of means, and, what was more serious still, entirely unprotected?"

"That's true—that's very true," said Josephine. "I'm ashamed to admit that that never occurred to me. That was a—yes, there's no denying it—a serious oversight on John Walton's part."

"It was unpardonable. And what will you say,

Miss Thirlwell, when I tell you that this man—this John Walton—has a daughter of his own? It's beyond belief. Think of it! By one kindly action—perhaps merely by speaking one kindly word to her about her future—he might have saved that sweet girl from all those four years of misery through which she passed! By God! I felt inclined to spring from my chair and strike him down. It was the conduct of a dastard. I can never forgive him!”

Martin Redwood sank down with his head between his hands, seemingly overcome by the thoughts to which he had given such impulsive utterance.

Josephine bent over him and placed her hand tenderly upon his shoulder.

“Dear friend, dear Chevalier Bayard! I'm ready to admit that Mr. Walton was to blame—greatly to blame, if you will have it so. But we must bear in mind that when he called upon the lady of Vesprie Towers, he probably took for granted—and not unnaturally—that she had friends, if not relations, and indeed her brave show of independence must have almost confirmed him in that belief.”

But Redwood shook his head. “Don't defend him. He doesn't deserve it. Did not his wealthy client, Mr. Brandon, show the deepest interest in Miss Vesprie? It was an example he would have done well to follow. Do you know, my dear Miss Thirlwell, I begin to think—though there is no need to think about it now—that a will may have existed in which Mr. Brandon bequeathed the Towers and

most, if not all, of his wealth to Violet Vesprie. The will may have been destroyed, or it may never have been attested. There is no need to enquire into all that now. No object would be gained. But I like to imagine that *it might have been*. I like to imagine that Vesprie Towers could never cease to be the home of the Vespries. I like to think, as Violet Vesprie thinks, that for some mysterious reason far beyond our comprehension the Vesprie lands cannot be alienated from the Vesprie family ! ”

While Violet still stood listening to these words of Martin Redwood's that expressed so aptly her own thoughts, a bright acquiescent smile lit up her eyes. As he ceased to speak she turned and hastened to retrace her steps towards the Towers.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MEETING BY THE MERE

ON reaching the house, Violet went and sat near the open window in her mother's boudoir, recalling to mind, again and again, every word she had overheard between her friend and Martin Redwood.

She was still seated there, lost in thought, when Josephine appeared on the terrace, and on seeing her hastened towards her.

"I have seen him!"

"Yes," replied Violet. "Your face would tell me that, if I had need to be told. I too have seen him."

"Is it not wonderful? He is alive! I can hardly yet realise that it's true."

Violet rose from her chair and stood before Josephine with downcast eyes.

"I've something to confess," said she. "I hope you will forgive me. This morning I went out into the woods to search for you, for I wished to be the first to break the news. I found you at last. You were seated beside him down by the mere, and——"

"And you overheard the talk between us?"

"Yes, I will tell you every word that came to me while I stood with only a leafy branch between us. It was disgraceful, I cannot expect your forgiveness."

“Dear girl! What could you do that I would not forgive?” said Josephine. “But tell me all you heard. Nothing, I’m sure, that I should not have told you before this day of all days had come to an end.”

Violet hastened to repeat in detail all that she had overheard, her voice frequently broken with the emotion her recital naturally awakened. When she had finished, she sat in silence, her look bent thoughtfully upon her friend, whose look was no less thoughtful.

“Josephine,” said she, at last, “How you love him!”

“Yes, I love him. I love Martin Redwood,” said she, in a low voice, “as I am vain enough to believe, with a deeper and less selfish love than any woman ever loved. But he does not love me. He gave his love to another years before we ever met. He gave his great and enduring love to you.”

“Josephine! I grieve for you. You know I do. But I cannot listen.”

“You must listen! This may be our last day together. I am going away; but before I go I must and will plead for him. My sole thought is for his happiness, not for my own. If I can bring that about I—I shall live content.”

“Ah, Josephine! your love for Martin Redwood is deep indeed.”

“It’s my love for him that impels me to speak. Dear Violet! it’s in your power to confer upon him all the happiness he craves for. I believe that in your heart—yes, dear, I firmly believe it—you love him! Don’t let this worldly barrier, this

inborn pride of class, keep you and Martin any longer apart. He is the very hero you dreamed of—here in your lonely days—your hero incarnate. Only think for a moment! Is he not a true poet? And have we not both had every proof that he is brave, chivalrous, courteous as Bayard himself? And now because you cannot add to all these virtues that of high birth, you are going to let the man you love—your hero—pass the rest of his days in misery, as I foresee you will pass *your* days, if you refuse to seize this chance of happiness that God has given you while there is still time.”

Violet Vesprie sat there mute and still, gazing out of the window upon the sunny landscape with a fixed and dreamy gaze. So absorbed was she in contending with the opposing thoughts that Josephine’s words had awakened, that she neither felt her friend’s tender embrace nor the soft touch of her hand. Even the whispered words, “Good-bye!” escaped her as Josephine glided from the room.

When Violet roused herself out of the absent-minded condition into which the incidents connected with Martin Redwood and Josephine had thrown her, she was surprised to find herself alone. She rose hastily and ran upstairs to the studio to look for her friend. But she was not there; she was nowhere in the house. There were a thousand and one things that Violet was eager to confide, and not finding Josephine indoors, she hurried out into the park, and with a step even more hasty than she had taken when in search of her a few hours ago.

Besides the numerous attainments, such as boxing, shooting, fishing, running, riding, and driving, which Violet had acquired under her brother Lawrie's tuition in the years of their open-air childhood, she had acquired the art of whistling. By placing two fingers between her lips in a skilfully adjusted manner, she could emit a sound shrill enough to be heard distinctly in any corner of the park. It was a whistle to which the children had resorted when in search of each other in Vesprie woods; and Violet had taught Josephine this elegant accomplishment in the first days of their sojourn together at the Towers.

Violet now had repeated recourse to this convenient device while hastening on her search through the park and round the willow-ridden banks of the mere. But her penetrating whistle, though rousing innumerable echoes from the distant backwater, and from the neighbouring woods and walled-in boundaries beyond, brought from Josephine no response.

Violet wandered disconsolately back towards the Towers. As she was passing near the park gates, she caught sight of the lodge-keeper, Lizzie Curtis, on the steps outside the front door.

"Have you seen Miss Thirlwell?" said Violet.  
 "I can't find her anywhere."

"Yes, miss. She went out hours ago."

"Went out . . . ?"

"Yes, miss. I opened the gate myself to let her out. She's gone to London I'm a-thinkin'."

"To London? She never told me a word about it. Do you know what it means?"



"Not me, miss. But stop ! She left a letter for you, didn't she ? "

"No, not that I know of. What makes you think that ? "

"'Cos she told me she did," said Lizzie. "She told me, as she was a-goin' out at these very gates, that she'd left a letter for you on the dressing-table in your bedroom. She seemed in a flurry-like, and not herself at all. I did notice that, now I comes to think of it."

"What else did she say ? Pray tell me everything, Lizzie. I can't make out what it means."

"There's nothing much to tell, miss. I'm a goin' to town, Liz," says she, "and I don't know when I shall be back. But I've left a letter for Miss Vesprie on her dressing-table. Good-bye ! ' That's every word she spoke. But she took my hand hurriedly, she did, and pressed it, and next minute she was gone."

Violet hastened back to the Towers. She ran to her room, and casting a quick glance towards her dressing-table, she saw, lying beneath the little locket that held the photograph of Martin Redwood, a sealed, oblong letter. It was addressed in Josephine's artistic handwriting.

"Violet Vesprie, of Vesprie Towers."

With trembling fingers, she broke the seal.

It was not a long letter. But every line was expressive of earnestness and of the tenderest affection. In words that revealed the depth of her passionate nature, she frankly confessed that it was her love for Martin Redwood and his interesting

talks about a girl named Violet Vesprie and her romantic life at Vesprie Towers had impelled her, when the report of his assassination reached her, to seek out John Walton and secure a lease of the Vesprie domain. For it was the spot Martin had loved most in this world, as she had soon discovered—the spot where the girl was born, the spot made sacred by her presence in every nook and corner. Josephine further confessed that she had had a premonition that the day would come when this girl, whom he had worshipped so devoutly, would be seized with the impulse to return to her home, the home that she believed could never pass from the Vesprie family. By this means she would be brought into her life and be loved by her because she had been loved by him. For Martin Redwood's sake, Josephine had resolved, she told her, to constitute herself her friend—her devoted guardian—even as the “Chevalier Bayard” had done. She had bid the Chevalier good-bye that morning, she concluded, as she was now bidding Violet good-bye, for she had firmly resolved to quit England at once and for ever.

How lonely the days at Vesprie Towers appeared to Violet now ! And yet in the old days she had never experienced the least sense of loneliness. Before Violet fully realised that Josephine had gone out of her life, almost on the first day of this sudden deprivation, she wrote to John Walton, urging him, if he had any influence over her, to persuade her friend to return to Vesprie Towers. But Walton, while expressing his sympathy, held out little hope

of success, for "after settling all outstanding business matters between herself and his firm, Miss Thirlwell," he wrote, "had furnished him with no address where letters would be likely to reach her."

But there was another serious matter upon which Violet determined, after some days of distressful hesitation, to consult John Walton. It was her earnest wish—if so delicate an affair could be possibly arranged—to make over to Martin Redwood at least a moiety of that vast sum, "amounting to close upon half a million pounds sterling" (as Walton had expressed it in one of his numerous business letters), that had been bequeathed to her by Redwood's mother. In reply, John Walton had, in his best style of legal formality, assured her that "he would give her generous proposition his prompt attention."

And now the sense of loneliness at Vesprie Towers grew keener, and presently came to be almost beyond endurance. The weeks that had formerly seemed like days now seemed to Violet Vesprie like tedious years that would never have an end.

She had bravely endured the dispiriting effect of this solitary life at Vesprie Towers for some weeks, when one afternoon an impulse which she could not explain induced her to wander into her father's library.

The room contained an antique piece of furniture that had been of absorbing interest to her as far back as she could remember. It was a large oak cabinet, with a semi-circle at the top, surmounted by an angel carved in oak with outspread arms and by

carved oaken busts on the capitals, with wide fluted pillars on each side. In front of this cabinet were eight panels, and on each panel was painted a design representing St. George and the Dragon.

Violet paused before this old bureau, with a dreamy far-away look in her eyes. It was the bureau in which her father had always kept the rainbow topaz. She had often seen him go there and lift it out of its secret nest in the centre of the cabinet, when his spirits were at a low ebb, and carry it to one of the windows and gaze meditatively into its many coloured facets until completely rid of his depression.

She had deposited the jewel in the drawer on the morning following her return to Vesprie Towers. Since that day she had, strangely enough, as she now reflected, never glanced at her precious stone, scarcely given it, indeed, a single thought. Her life in the woods and meadows throughout this glorious summer, with her enchantress, Josephine Thirlwell, to give the finishing touch to her happiness, had driven thoughts of everything else completely out of her mind. She now opened the cabinet and took out the jewel. Then, stepping to the window, she removed it from its dilapidated leathern case and gazed at it with a long and steadfast gaze, as she had gazed into it at her garret window in Sunflower Court.

Suddenly a look of expectancy lit up her eyes. She restored the jewel to its case, and went out with it in her hand into the home park.

She walked in the direction of the mere. On reaching the water's edge, she seated herself on an

elevated grassy bank. A slight refreshing breeze fanned her healthful cheeks. Whether it so chanced that the invigorating sight of the sparkling topaz which she was looking into so intently, or whatever the cause, Violet had not felt so elated in body or mind since the day when Josephine went out of her life as she felt now, on this brilliant autumnal afternoon. She was shaded from the bright sunlight by the overhanging bough of a huge oak on the rising ground immediately behind her. Of a sudden she looked up, for a gloom had spread over the sky, and she now perceived that rain-clouds were gathering overhead; and presently heavy drops began to fall, but the great leafy bough of the oak effectually sheltered her.

At this moment a curious, magical light apprised her that there was a magnificent rainbow glowing in the eastern sky. In an instant the words of the Vesprie prophecy rose up in her memory :

“Vesprie luck shall never die,  
While the rainbow in the sky  
Makes a rainbow in the water  
For a sign to son or daughter.”

She sprang to her feet, and stood looking down into the mere. A joyous cry escaped her. For there, in the expanse of water stretching out before her eyes, was a mirrored rainbow, the symbol of the good luck of Vesprie Towers !

While she still stood looking with fascinated gaze at this beautiful sight, the strange fancy came to her that near one of the limbs of the reflected rainbow she could see in the water of the ruffled mere the blurred outlines of her own face and form, and

close beside her a face and form that at once reminded her of her hero—Martin Redwood!

The figure at her side was clothed in the picturesque garb of a yachtsman, standing motionless, cap in hand, and bent slightly forward.

“Forgive me! I’ve startled you. But—but I couldn’t leave the country without thanking you for your offer—which I can never accept—your generous offer to—to share your fortune with me.”

“Generous? The whole fortune belongs to you. It is yours by right of inheritance, not mine,” said Violet, as she turned slowly round to find herself face to face with the young sailor.

“It belongs to the luck of Vesprie Towers, which, as we are told,” said he, “sometimes takes human shape. It has taken human shape on this occasion, as it has done before—in the waters of the mere—in the form of a beautiful young girl.”

Violet made no reply. She stood with the topaz still in her hand, looking down into the lake, where the colours of the mirrored rainbow were slowly fading.

“Yes,” Martin Redwood went on, “the form of a young girl who, following the impulse of her sweet nature, once stood up at an osier feast and condescended to kiss the forehead of a sailor, her brother’s friend, and by that kindly action saved him from drunkenness and utter desolation.”

Violet remained silent, her eyes still bent upon the mere.

“This girl, who saved her brother’s friend from ruin, also befriended a poor starving waif and saved her from a ruin incomparably worse. Indeed, the



luck of Vesprie Towers never in all its transfigurations took so divine a shape. No one has reason to know that better than I. And no one has reason to be more grateful for it. May the luck of Vesprie Towers always retain the form it has taken to-day! Good-bye!"

Violet looked up. The rain-clouds had disappeared and every sign of the rainbow had gone out of the sky, and the sunshine came forth, spreading in wings of light over meadow and mere. Nature was smiling serenely on every side in all its autumnal beauty.

"Don't go!"

It was an utterance expressive of despair, and as the words fell upon Martin Redwood's ear, the look that came into his face was one of doubt whether he had the right to believe his own senses. He stood dumbfounded, for the plaintive tone was unlike the voice of Violet—so unlike the voice of the imperious mistress of Vesprie Towers.

"I'm so lonely," she pleaded. "Josephine has left me. I am far more lonely than I was when in London, poverty-stricken and without a friend, except Molly, in the whole world! There is no one to whom I can speak, or, at least, care to speak, from morning to night. I am utterly lonely here."

"Lonely at Vesprie Towers?" said Redwood. "I have always looked upon you as one who found infinite delight in living alone! You assuredly did so in the old days when—when——"

"Ah, yes! when I was dreaming my life away in Poverty Island, as I used to call this home when I



was here alone with my ancestors. That's what you mean. Yes, yes. But things are so—so different now. I want someone—someone in whom I can confide. I want someone to come to me and—and . . .”

Martin sprang towards her and with sudden impulse clasped her in his arms.

“And share with you the luck of Vesprie Towers?”

“Yes . . . yes! . . . share with me the luck of Vesprie Towers.”

And placing her hand upon his head, expressing in the action infinite tenderness and passion, she pressed her lips to Martin Redwood's forehead as she had done when standing beside him on the osier ait more than four years ago.

The day had begun to wane, when Violet Vesprie and her hero, Martin Redwood, side by side, turned from the water's edge and strolled across the meadows down into the elm-tree avenue. And now the faint memory of sunset began to die out below the western horizon, and the old Vesprie elms seemed to wake up in the grey twilight into spectral life and consciousness, and star after star came throbbing out over their heads as the night closed in around them, and the leafy branches stretched out their shadows and screened them from view.





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